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South Korea: President Chun's Opponents



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A Research Paper

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April 1983

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South Korea: President Chun's Opponents




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A Research Paper

This paper was prepared by  Office
of East Asian Analysis. Comments and queries are
welcome and may be addressed to the Chief,
Northeast Asia Division, OEA 

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**South Korea:
President Chun's Opponents** [Redacted]

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Summary

*Information available
as of 5 April 1983
was used in this report.*

During the turbulent period following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee in 1979, an articulate minority in South Korea argued that the far-reaching social and economic changes brought about during the 18 years of Park's rule made the Korean people ready for a more open and democratic political system. Such views did not prevail, however, as Army units put down the 1980 civil disturbances at Kwangju and as Gen. Chun Doo Hwan and his military backers moved to consolidate power.

Using a combination of intimidation and enticement, President Chun has restored a fair degree of political stability in the South over the past three years. Uprisings like the one at Kwangju have not recurred. Nonetheless, we believe that the desire for political liberalization—fed by rapid economic development—remains strong in South Korea. The Chun government itself appears to recognize the need for at least incremental political modernization, although it remains wary of sharing real power.

South Korea's dissidents are not likely to present a significant challenge to Chun's rule over the coming year or so at least. Memories of the Kwangju fighting have continued to dampen broad support for dissident activity, as does continuing concern about North Korean intentions. In recent months, moreover, Chun has carried out a series of liberalization gestures and promised again that he will step down at the end of his term in 1988—moves that have put his militant critics further off balance. Chun's difficult task in the future appears to be to pursue a political strategy that both reassures the Korean Army and at the same time holds out some hope of reform for the country's more responsible opposition forces.

This study is the first of two examining South Korea's political dynamics at the close of Chun's third year in power. It will focus on the opposition scene—students and intellectuals, Christian activists, opposition politicians, and the industrial work force.

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**South Korea:
President Chun's Opponents** [Redacted]

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Introduction

South Korean President Chun Doo Hwan restored a fair degree of political stability since coming to power three years ago but continues to face unceasing opposition from student dissidents and militant Christian activists. Dissident groups saw President Park's death as an opportunity to press for political reform, but Chun and his military backers were intent on consolidating their own power. [Redacted]

Faced with growing political turmoil, Chun resorted first to heavyhanded intimidation—using the military to put down the civil disturbance in Kwangju in May-June 1980. Scores of civilians were killed or injured in violent clashes with South Korean troops before the uprising in that southern city was broken. Kwangju has since become the rallying cry for dissidents of all stripes, but the government's forceful response at that time has discouraged activists from inviting a second demonstration of the iron fist. [Redacted]

Since then, student demonstrations have been met with a show of police force from the outset, and violent incidents have been held to a minimum. Educational reforms in 1981 have further dissuaded student activism by making higher education more competitive and sharply reducing the time students can spend away from their studies. [Redacted]

In recent months, Chun has put his opponents off balance by moving toward political liberalization and defusing several human rights issues:

- Kim Dae Jung, South Korea's best known dissident politician, was released from prison last December.
- Amnesty was also proclaimed in December for Kim's codefendants and some 40 other dissidents.
- Some of Chun's more widely disliked policy advisers were dismissed.
- Political rights were restored to 300 politicians banned from political activity until 1988—and Chun promised to lift the bans on some 200 others prior to the 1985 National Assembly elections.

- The death sentences of two Christian dissidents who masterminded the firebombing of the American Cultural Center in Pusan in March 1982 were commuted. [Redacted]

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Social Setting

Chun has been aided by the generally conservative nature of South Korean society. Korea is ethnically and culturally homogeneous; the society's cultural values generally reinforce conformity and group harmony and foster the pursuit of personal and family advancement within the existing system rather than rebellion against it. [Redacted]

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The regime's most persistent opponents—mainly student and Christian activists—constitute a relatively small minority of the broader communities they represent. Although many South Koreans are sympathetic with the dissident demands, in our assessment neither student activists nor Christian dissidents are widely viewed as being legitimate forces in partisan politics. [Redacted]

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The majority of South Koreans, including the growing urban working and middle classes, accept the government's argument that political unity and cooperation are necessary to sustain economic development and to avoid a renewed North-South conflict. We believe most Koreans also calculate that active opposition will be futile and costly as long as the regime retains the support of the military and the domestic intelligence network is intact and loyal. [Redacted]

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Potential for Trouble

Through his own actions and an understanding of Korean society, Chun has succeeded in quieting his opponents. There will undoubtedly be student demonstrations this spring, as always, but they are unlikely to get out of hand. [Redacted]

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Over the longer term, however, the possibility of destabilizing opposition activity remains. Urbanization and industrialization are gradually shifting the political balance toward urban groups, which have been the main supporters of opposition political parties in past elections. We believe that expanding higher education and greater awareness of foreign political values and institutions—fostered in part by the rapid growth of Christianity and the presence of Western missionaries—are increasing the demand for political participation and lowering the tolerance for repression of dissent. Given his own and the military's conservative predilections, Chun is unlikely to be fully responsive to this growing pressure.

The real test will come when Chun reveals his political intentions for 1988, when his term in office expires. He has steadfastly maintained that he will step down at that time. If so, it will be the first peaceful transferral of power in modern times but many Koreans doubt it will happen.

Should Chun seek to retain power, his opponents will find it much easier to attract the popular support they now lack. Such a move would also present the United States with the choice of reaffirming support for Chun—which might well foster a sharp increase in violent anti-Americanism—or censuring him and risking a deeper entanglement in South Korean politics.

Students and Intellectuals

Student dissidence is rooted in the Confucian ideal of scholarly protest and in nationalist movements against Japanese colonial rule. Students touched off the mass demonstrations that were instrumental in unseating President Syngman Rhee in 1960. Student demonstrations were also an unceasing annoyance to the Park government; they triggered the riots in Pusan and Masan that prompted Park's assassination in October 1979.

Student opposition to Chun began in the confrontation between student protestors and the Martial Law Command during the spring of 1980 as Chun moved to solidify his support in the military and transform

himself into a civilian president. Street demonstrations led Chun to declare nationwide martial law in May 1980 and to arrest Kim Dae Jung, his leading civilian opponent, for fomenting civil unrest. Harsh military actions taken against pro-Kim demonstrators in Kwangju resulted in scores of civilian deaths and triggered violent demonstrations throughout the city.

[redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] approximately 4,300 students—less than 1 percent of all students—are hardcore dissidents, resentment toward Chun is widespread, even among students who avoid participating in protest activities.

Other than the ever present issue of Chun's legitimacy, protest themes include:

- Demands for the restoration of human rights and an end to press censorship.
- The alleged torture of political prisoners and suspects in political cases.
- Government suppression of worker-oriented Christian social action organizations.
- Criticism of the United States for supporting Chun's rise to power and its tacit agreement in the use of regular South Korean Army troops to put down the Kwangju disturbances.

Although South Koreans are generally tolerant of student protests, the country's political culture does not endorse the participation of students in organized partisan politics. Because students view themselves as pure-minded "guardians of the national conscience" and see politics as inherently tainted by corruption and compromise, they rarely identify openly with a specific party or candidate. The sentiment of protest—not ideological commitment—is the wellspring of South Korean student activism. Consequently, there are no significant factional divisions among students based on ideological disputes.

While student demonstrations focus public attention on political issues, they rarely play a major role in shaping public attitudes toward these issues. [redacted] even less well-educated South Koreans view campus protestors

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as naive. Nonetheless, students are respected for their success in a highly competitive educational system and recognized as the nation's future social and economic elites. [redacted]

Chun's tools for dealing with student dissidence include the Korean National Police (KNP), the Agency for National Security Planning (NSP—formerly the Korean Central Intelligence Agency), and the Defense Security Command (DSC—the military security service). All are involved in countering campus unrest, but interservice rivalries result in limited cooperation. [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted]

Most campus disturbances last year were small, arising from students handing out leaflets and demonstrating during campus festivals or athletic events. Two street demonstrations in downtown Seoul last year were quickly dispersed. Strict surveillance has prevented the prestigious Seoul National University, Korea University, Yonsei University, and Ehwa Women's University—all in Seoul—from taking their traditional lead in mounting larger student demonstrations—although these campuses remain the most politically active. [redacted]

The government typically depends on large numbers of combat police with riot gear to confine student demonstrators while plainclothes officers round up the leaders. [redacted]

[redacted]

At the same time, Chun's antipathy toward university students and intellectuals generally has resulted in stricter application of judicial and administrative sanctions against demonstrators than during the Park era:

- Regular imposition of jail sentences.
- Immediate military conscription of demonstrators.
- Blacklisting activists to prevent major firms from hiring them.
- Banning extracurricular student organizations.
- Trying to force professors to grade students on their "attitude." [redacted]

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Educational reforms have also dampened campus political activities. The government's decision in 1981 to expand freshman enrollments sharply and to impose a mandatory 20- to 30-percent failure rate before graduation has harnessed students more tightly to academic pursuits. The Ministry of Education's recent proposal to replace midterm and final examinations with more frequent exams would tighten the reins further. [redacted]

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Although these measures have inhibited students from protesting, they have also deepened their resentment toward Chun and appear to be counterproductive on several other counts. South Korean professors have told US Embassy officials that strict campus controls have alienated politically inactive students, radicalized others, and encouraged some to form small tightly knit "student circles" to discuss banned political readings. Dissident students reportedly now bait professors with politically sensitive questions and berate them for not following the example of professors who have been dismissed for their criticism of the government. [redacted]

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We believe that over the longer term the recently enacted educational reforms increase the risk that the social and economic aspirations of significant numbers of university students will not be met. In particular, students forced out of universities under the quota system probably will feel humiliation and anger toward the government. [redacted]

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How Real Is Student Radicalism?

[redacted] student dissidence as intertwined with alleged Communist conspiracies or espionage cases that have periodically been exposed and prosecuted since the 1950s. This linkage is very tenuous. [redacted]

The March 1982 firebombing of the American Cultural Center in Pusan provided the government an opportunity to step up efforts to discredit both student activists and Christian dissidents. Government prosecutors portrayed the arsonists—members of a student circle at a little-known conservative Protestant school of theology—as revolutionaries under the direction of committed older radicals with known ties to Christian dissidents. [redacted]

The arrest of a Catholic priest, Father Choe Ki-sik, for harboring the suspects provided a link to alleged revolutionary clergymen. The government's effort to discredit student and Christian activists as dangerous radicals was met with widespread public skepticism and an indignant reaction from the Christian community. The support of the Catholic leadership for the accused, coupled with allegations that torture has been used to extract incriminating ideological statements, further convinced many South Korean and foreign observers that the incident was little more than a student protest that went too far—not, as the government claimed, a terrorist attack by student revolutionaries [redacted]

Changing Student Attitudes

A poll of university students taken in July 1982 disclosed that although three-fourths of the 900 students questioned endorsed the need for basic social and economic reforms, the overwhelming majority also rejected Communism as "ineffectual and unrealistic." Nonetheless, there appears to be a resurgent interest among students in socialist economic and political models and in neo-Marxist historical studies.

Such concepts are an important element in the thinking of modern Korean intellectuals, a result of long exposure to intellectual trends in Japan and the strong socialist and Communist dimension of Korea's anti-Japanese independence movement. [redacted]

Korean educators and authorities are also concerned about several other nationalist or anti-American trends among student activists:

- Growing disenchantment with Western-style democracy.
- Declining sensitivity to the North Korean threat.
- A growing belief that Korea's continued division serves US interests.
- Closer identification with Third World issues. [redacted]

South Korean public opinion polls repeatedly rank the United States at or near the top of a list of countries most liked and most respected. Nevertheless, even Western-educated academics admit there is some resentment of the United States among Korean intellectuals. Such sentiments, the academics explain, are based on deep-seated misgivings about US intentions toward and commitments to South Korea and perceived US hypocrisy in supporting repressive regimes and encouraging one-sided economic arrangements. [redacted]

Shortly after the Pusan arson incident, the government sponsored a series of faculty seminars on countering student radicalism through ideological education. The government has since relaxed the ban on some nonpolemic political writings and has promoted university research institutes to develop critical assessments of leftist thinking for use in ideological training programs. [redacted]

Prospects

Using tight surveillance and manipulative educational reforms, the Chun regime has so far succeeded in managing and containing student dissent. Administrators at several universities have stated that the fatal beating of a businessman by police interrogators

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in late March may serve as a catalyst for widespread antigovernment campus demonstrations. [redacted]

[redacted]

the need for restraint by both the government and opposition to avoid repetitions of such confrontations. Chun, without implying personal culpability, has sought to assuage bitterness over Kwangju by gradually releasing demonstrators who, according to the government, have shown repentance. [redacted]

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Unless the government overreacts in suppressing campus protests, we expect antiestablishment university students to continue the pattern of becoming more moderate and pragmatic as they approach graduation and seek employment—often in the government or one of the country's large corporations. [redacted]

Christian dissent is also closely associated with human rights issues. Protests by liberal church groups against alleged incidents of torture and against the confinement of an estimated 300 to 400 "prisoners of conscience" have been instrumental in bringing international attention to human rights issues in South Korea. [redacted]

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Christian Dissidents

The rapidly growing Christian churches in South Korea are likely, we believe, to continue to provide the safest ground for political dissent. Like student activists, Christian dissidents claim a long tradition of political protest and close ties to the anti-Japanese independence movement. Unlike students, however, the Christian community is divided on whether the church should be involved in social and political affairs. [redacted]

The government has repeatedly denied that the use of torture is authorized. Senior South Korean officials, for example, have asserted in private discussions with US officials that Chun has forbidden the violation of suspects' rights during interrogation. [redacted]

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[redacted] political suspects have been subjected to harsh treatment—although perhaps without the knowledge of senior officials. The Human Rights Committee (HRC) of the Korean National Council of Churches (KNCC) was established in 1974 as a response of concerned—generally younger—churchmen to reports of torture and other repressive actions under President Park. [redacted]

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For the most part, Christian dissident organizations have avoided directly challenging Chun's legitimacy and have focused on issues that most Christian activists accept as legitimate extensions of the church's pastoral responsibilities:

- "National reconciliation" to heal the wounds left by the Kwangju civil disturbances.
- Human rights—particularly the use of torture by the security services.
- Government harassment or suppression of Christian social action programs among young urban workers and poor farmers. [redacted]

The Chun government from its beginning was particularly concerned by the connections between Christian activists and Kim Dae Jung, who for many years was the Korean human rights movement's most prominent symbol. [redacted]

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Although Kim's press statements in the United States have caused Chun some concern, we believe Kim now has little influence among South Korean dissidents. [redacted]

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The memory of Kwangju still evokes deep-seated anger among many South Koreans and, in our view, has made even politically moderate Christians more sympathetic to the actions of government critics. Awareness that clergymen and foreign missionaries assisted Kwangju fugitives has further legitimized the activists' position on Kwangju. At the same time, recollections of Kwangju have placed limits on Christian militancy; we believe many church members see

¹ At the time of Park's assassination, the HRC leadership was a center of support for Kim. [redacted]

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Chun also has allowed a limited revival of the HRC prayer meetings, which were the leading human rights forum until they were banned in May 1980. The HRC is still not allowed to provide legal services in human rights cases, however. [redacted]



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Church sponsorship of worker-oriented social action programs is perhaps the most serious source of conflict between the government and Christian activists. Chun and many of his top advisers appear sincere in their belief that these activities are Communist inspired and provide radicals an opportunity to foment unrest among workers. Although only a small proportion of Christians support these programs actively, many Christian leaders publicly reject the government's assertion that the programs are pro-Communist or foment social instability. They point out that in September 1979 a government report affirmed the legitimacy of such Christian social programs as the Urban Industrial Mission (UIM) and the Catholic Farmers Association and found no evidence of pro-Communist sympathy. [redacted]

The six Protestant denominations that belong to the Korean National Council of Churches encompass approximately one-third of Korean Protestants and represent more moderate and liberal Christian groups. According to the US Embassy, the current president of the Korean National Council of Churches is more liberal and politically committed than his predecessor, but apparently more cautious than the leading radical Protestant clergymen. There is strong conservative opposition to church political involvement even within some KNCC member denominations. [redacted]

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[redacted] these groups have begun looking to their pastors recently for more socially relevant pastoral messages. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, both Chun and his predecessor assigned high priority to discrediting and eradicating these relatively small programs [redacted]

[redacted] support for the Urban Industrial Mission is concentrated in a few congregations, rather than broadly endorsed by the sponsoring denominations. Although the most militant congregations consist largely of young workers, according to knowledgeable sources the majority of small churches in poor districts—many representing splinter evangelical denominations—remain politically inactive even though their clergy are regularly called on to help church members in trouble with the police or other government agencies. [redacted]

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[redacted] We believe the government fears that social action programs could lead to broader church involvement in political activities. Indeed, activities such as assertiveness training programs and labor counseling by the UIM and several worker-oriented Catholic organizations—if left unchecked—probably would work to undercut the government's paternalistic approach to labor-management relations. The government's apparent concern with programs that compete with its own efforts has even led it to restrict the activities of church-sponsored rural credit unions. [redacted]

The few activist congregations are, nonetheless, apparently able to marshal considerable financial resources. [redacted]

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Activists in the Minority

In general, the Christian community in Korea is not politically active. A poll by the militant Korean Christian Research Center on Social Affairs acknowledges that only 5 percent of the responding clergy strongly favored church participation in politics, while more than half of the clergy and laymen opposed participation. The rest gave only limited support to church involvement. [redacted]

Several foreign church organizations have been strongly supportive of Christian dissident organizations. For example, most of the Human Rights Committee's annual budget of \$100,000 to \$150,000 [redacted]

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comes from foreign sources—primarily British and German—and is transferred in part through the World Council of Churches, according to US Embassy officials in contact with the Christian groups. The UIM reportedly also is directly funded by US and West European church bodies. US Embassy officials report that late last year the West German Evangelical Church threatened to withhold support of its counterpart Korean denominations unless the Korean church continued to sponsor the UIM [redacted]

Although Korean Catholics are outnumbered 5 to 1 by Protestants, they form the largest single Christian denomination. South Korean and foreign observers alike note that the Korean Catholic Church has taken an increasingly prominent role in dissident activities over the past decade. [redacted]

[redacted]

Increased Catholic activism appears to have been the result of younger Korean priests moving into positions of leadership, the sympathy of South Korea's three foreign bishops to dissident concerns, and the Church's more tolerant attitude in recent years toward the involvement of priests and nuns in secular affairs. Although a loose organization of about 100 older "Priests of the Fatherland" opposes the Church's involvement in political affairs, two of the most influential church leaders have spoken openly on human rights and other dissident issues: Cardinal Kim Su Hwan, the widely respected and moderate titular leader of the approximately 4,800 Catholic clergy, and the more liberal second-ranking prelate, Archbishop Yun Kong Hui. [redacted]

Such statements from the highest level of the Korean Church hierarchy have lent some legitimacy to dissident concerns and have probably undercut government efforts to depict all criticism of the regime's political agenda as aiding P'yongyang. Nonetheless, Catholic militants appear to have a long way to go to build an effective challenge to Chun's power. The

progressive Catholic Justice and Peace Commission claims the support of approximately 800 clergymen, including several hundred more openly active members of the Kwangju-based Priests for the Realization of Justice. [redacted]

Government Tactics

After the Kwangju disturbances, Chun's Martial Law Command began to take the offensive against the Christian dissident community, particularly the Catholic Church. [redacted] Many clergymen and lay activists were rounded up and questioned. Such moves evidently were prompted by reports that priests were involved in hiding Kwangju fugitives, a firebombing attack on the American Cultural Center in Kwangju in late 1980 by members of the Catholic Farmer's Association, and the outspokenness of the Catholic leadership on human rights. The government campaign was reinforced when it became known that a Catholic priest had provided refuge to an individual involved in the arson attack on the American Cultural Center in Pusan. [redacted]

The series of liberalization gestures that Chun has made in recent months have eased pressures on Christians as well as other dissidents. Even so, the government almost certainly remains concerned that the Christian community as a whole may move gradually toward broader support for church involvement in human rights issues and social action programs as younger, better educated, and more politically aware laymen and clergy become influential in church affairs. [redacted]

Opposition Political Parties

Shortly after moving into the presidency, Chun extended his sweeping "purification campaign" to the leadership of the civilian political parties, charging that they were self-serving, ineffectual, and corrupt. As a result, all existing political parties were disbanded and 567 former progovernment and opposition

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figures were banned from political activities until 30 June 1988. Early in 1983 Chun lifted the ban on some 250 of these individuals. [redacted]

[redacted] These politicians face an uphill struggle, however, to rebuild their careers. The ban effectively silenced nearly all well-known political figures and government critics during the first three years of Chun's rule. [redacted]

Following the ban, the Democratic Justice Party (DJP) was organized under Chun's leadership as a new government party. The regime also promoted the formation of two new opposition parties to run against Chun in the presidential elections in February 1981 and to act as opposition parties in the National Assembly. [redacted]

The Korea National Party (KNP), the smaller of the newly created opposition parties, draws most of its membership from the late President Park's Democratic Republican Party and from former appointed members of the National Assembly. The new regime initially expected the KNP to support the government's position in the National Assembly because of the KNP's origins and the government's role in promoting the political fortunes of those opposition politicians it prefers to deal with. However, the KNP has sought to shed its image as a refuge for Park loyalists who were not accepted into the DJP and has pursued an independent posture in the National Assembly. [redacted]

The KNP's 13.3-percent share of the popular vote in the 1981 National Assembly election gained the party 18 of the 184 elected seats and seven of the proportioned seats.² At present the party's base is narrow and scattered. Most KNP lawmakers represent districts in small and medium cities, and the party has little strength in the major metropolitan areas or the Cholla region—the principal centers of opposition support in the past. [redacted]

As the intended core opposition, the Democratic Korea Party (DKP) was created by bringing together

² The proportioned seats are allocated according to a formula that gives 61 seats to the leading party and 24 seats and seven seats, respectively, to the second- and third-ranking parties. [redacted]

the shell of the disbanded New Democratic Party (NDP)—the former opposition party—and a number of longtime independent professional politicians. Its 21.6 percent of the vote in the National Assembly election gave the party 58 elected and 24 proportioned seats. The DKP, like the NDP before it, gets most of its support from the Seoul metropolitan area, Pusan, and the Cholla region; it only has a toehold in the Kyongsang region from which Chun and many current military and civilian leaders come. [redacted]

Several splinter parties emerged independently at the time the three major parties were being organized. Some have been pressured by the government into disbanding, and several others dissolved for lack of support. None carry any significant political influence. [redacted]

The KNP and DKP—which together control about two-fifths of the National Assembly—share essentially the same legislative goals: reduced government control of the press and political activities, enactment of local autonomy, revision of the election laws, and restoration of the National Assembly's investigative powers. Although these parties seek some of the same reforms demanded by dissidents, neither party has sought dissident support. [redacted]

Despite their inauspicious beginning, the leading opposition parties have had some success in creating the image of a vocal opposition. The constitution ostensibly protects lawmakers against prosecution for remarks made in the National Assembly. And since the financial scandal last spring involving relatives of President Chun's wife, both parties have been more willing to criticize the government's proposed legislation and to embarrass officials with pointed questions. Lesser crises subsequently allowed the opposition to broaden its criticism as the regime apparently sought to repair its image by relaxing constraints on debate. [redacted]

The government's failure to gain its own party's support for an important financial reform bill and the subsequent rejection of a controversial emergency mobilization bill may have convinced Chun that the

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government needed better means for tapping public opinion on proposed legislation. Shortly after the government's second failure in the National Assembly, Chun announced that future bills—except those relating to security matters—would be discussed at public hearings. [redacted]

Despite Chun's promise to revitalize partisan politics gradually, the opposition parties are unlikely to challenge the DJP's preeminence in the National Assembly. Without a larger block of National Assembly seats, the opposition has little power to negotiate compromises on government proposals. [redacted]

The government has also fostered rivalries within and between the KNP and the DKP that effectively obstruct any real coordination between the two opposition camps. Regionalism and past conflicts between KNP members once belonging to the former ruling party and their previous opponents in the DKP also deeply divide the two parties. The US Embassy believes party factionalism will heighten as the political bans are lifted from more important politicians. [redacted]

There is no precedent in South Korean politics for the peaceful transfer of power through the electoral process. We do not foresee the opposition parties soon overcoming the constitutional, cultural, and organizational obstacles they face and becoming near-equal participants in the legislative process or contenders for power. Even so, a government decision to restrict the DJP to unequivocal defense of the regime's policies may well bring the opposition parties wider support among voters who, while not fundamentally anti-Chun, wish to signal that the regime is ignoring their particular concerns. [redacted]

Labor

In the months following Park's assassination, South Korea witnessed more widespread labor conflict than at any time since the early 1970s. Even though the unrest was generally low level and localized, the relative press freedom at the time permitted detailed coverage of direct job actions, fostering the impression of serious social unrest. Worker grievances were

almost entirely economic, however, and there was no significant labor involvement in the May 1980 student demonstrations against Chun. After the declaration of martial law the military authorities tried to assuage immediate worker grievances while at the same time taking action to curtail activities. Nonetheless, Chun and his core group of supporters clearly remain concerned about the potential power of organized labor. [redacted]

As a result, the government forced industries to meet minimal obligations to workers and purged the national unions both of corrupt officials and those unlikely to cooperate with the Chun government. The regime also promulgated new labor laws that left the national labor organization nearly powerless by putting strict limits on permissible job actions and making local company unions the sole representatives in wage and contract negotiations. Of some 2.5 million wage workers in manufacturing and mining, nearly 1 million (40 percent) belong to such company unions. The remaining workers in these categories are not organized into any unions. [redacted]

The labor laws prohibit outside labor activists from organizing unions or participating in labor negotiations. This provision has been used to contain the labor activities of Christian social action groups. The most influential of these, the Urban Industrial Mission, focuses on raising social consciousness and appeals most strongly to young women workers. The government views the UIM as leftist oriented and fears it could draw workers into an antigovernment coalition with student and Christian dissidents. [redacted]

The Agency for National Security Planning (NSP) has characterized the UIM as the only organization capable of mobilizing workers for an antigovernment struggle. Dismantling the UIM was set as an NSP objective for 1982 and was largely effective. The government has arrested activist workers under the labor and assembly laws, blacklisted union members and sympathizers, and mobilized other workers to demonstrate against the UIM. The media have also been instructed to carry articles that blame UIM activists for the closure of the Control Data Korea

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facility—although the company’s own problems were largely responsible—for bankrupting several domestic firms, and for eroding the confidence of foreign investors in South Korea’s business climate. [redacted]

Economic insecurity and the government’s unrelenting hard line on church-related unions appear to have seriously undercut worker support for labor protests. The UIM has been reduced from seven to four branches and operates under tight government restrictions that have prohibited even health-related programs. Nonetheless, both UIM-affiliated clergy and priests associated with the young Catholic workers continue to provide moral support and advice to worker activists. [redacted]

We believe workers remain fundamentally dissatisfied with the ineffectual company unions and unhappy with government labor policies. [redacted]

[redacted]

Although DSC officials assess that there is only minimal contact between student groups and labor organizations and do not expect this to become a problem this year, countermeasures against efforts by student activists to politicize workers remain an important priority. [redacted]

Many fundamental labor grievances remain unresolved and have long-term implications that go beyond the issue of labor unrest. Despite continuing gains in real earnings in South Korean industries, the government’s failure to ensure reasonably safe working conditions, to require timely payment of delinquent wages, or to permit workers to improve their bargaining power through collective action could reinforce the notion that industrial wage employment offers little long-term job security. [redacted]

Employers in Korea—faced with increasing competition from other developing countries—seem likely to attempt to keep wages down by relying on a relatively young labor force and providing only limited career advancement opportunities. While manufacturing employment expanded rapidly in both scope and sophistication during the 1970s, the growth of opportunities that foster the development of a stable class of skilled blue-collar workers has been much slower. [redacted]

A harsh national labor policy that focuses primarily on curtailing political activity and fails to establish a framework for effective negotiation could be counterproductive. Such a policy would, in our judgment, curtail rather than foster the development of the skilled, experienced, and committed workers needed for a technically advanced manufacturing sector. In time, insufficient skills and strained labor-management relations could also discourage foreign investment. These long-term consequences may be the most costly potential outgrowth of policies aimed at essentially keeping labor quiet. [redacted]

Better educated, more politically aware industrial workers will almost certainly demand a more responsive system of labor-management relations. We believe some of Chun’s leading economic advisers are sensitive to this issue and envisage incremental changes in labor relations in the longer term. A main concern of South Korean authorities clearly would be to prevent discontented workers from adding a powerful voice to church-based demands for broad social and political reform. [redacted]

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