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# South Korea: Factors for Political Stability

An Intelligence Assessment

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An Intelligence Assessment

*Information available as of 15 August 1980  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

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December 1980

**South Korea:  
Factors for  
Political Stability**



**Key Judgments**

South Korea is not heading toward a revolution despite last spring's massive student antigovernment demonstrations, labor strife, and regional insurrection that required military intervention.

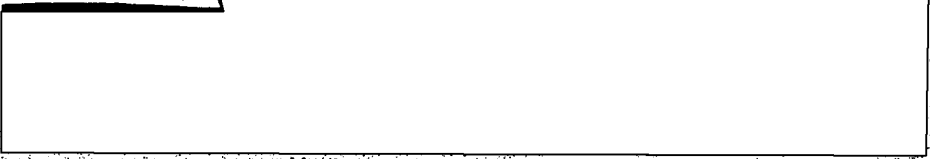
The leading advocates of radical change—students, Christian church leaders, labor unions, intellectuals, and opposition politicians—have failed to attract broad support. Even at the height of their demonstrations in May, students were unable to activate public opinion, and much of the public remained hostile to their excesses.



The public's deep-rooted fear of a North Korean military move against the South strengthens the Army's role in government and acts as a brake on any destabilizing activity that might be exploited by the North Koreans. Most South Koreans probably regard security against the North and their own economic interests as more important than political liberalization.

Historical and cultural factors have produced a population that will tolerate a relatively high level of governmental repression. The industrialization of South Korea has weakened traditional attitudes and values, but not to the point that large numbers of Koreans are prepared to confront a strong, authoritarian government head on.

The likelihood of a revolution appears remote, but the seeds of future confrontations between opposition groups and the military-dominated government remain.



## South Korea: Factors for Political Stability

**Spring 1980: Turmoil, But Not Revolution**  
Western press reporting over the past year—and particularly since President Park's assassination last October—has tended to portray South Korea as teetering on the brink of revolution. The unrest of last spring abetted the image of a highly unstable government and a restive population.

The last years of Park's rule indeed witnessed growing popular unhappiness with government repression and the failure to bring new faces into the leadership. By late 1979 some of this dissatisfaction had erupted into violence. Park's death brought hope that things would change, but probably few except the most idealistic liberals expected more than modest reforms.

Anti-Park groups, however, saw Park's death as the end of an era and began pressing for a complete dismantling of the repressive system that flowed from the Yusin constitution. They questioned the legitimacy of President Choi Kyu Hah's interim government and called for revenge against those who had benefited from the Yusin system.

Having probed the government's defenses and found them soft, students, dissidents, and opposition politicians stepped up their demands for liberalization.

The appointment in April of Chun Doo Hwan as director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) confirmed the opposition's worst fears and gave them a target to attack—another symbol of the Yusin system another Park Chung Hee.

To mollify its most volatile constituency—the students—the government made a series of concessions that only whetted the students' appetites. When campus demonstrations spilled onto the streets, the govern-



President Chun Doo Hwan

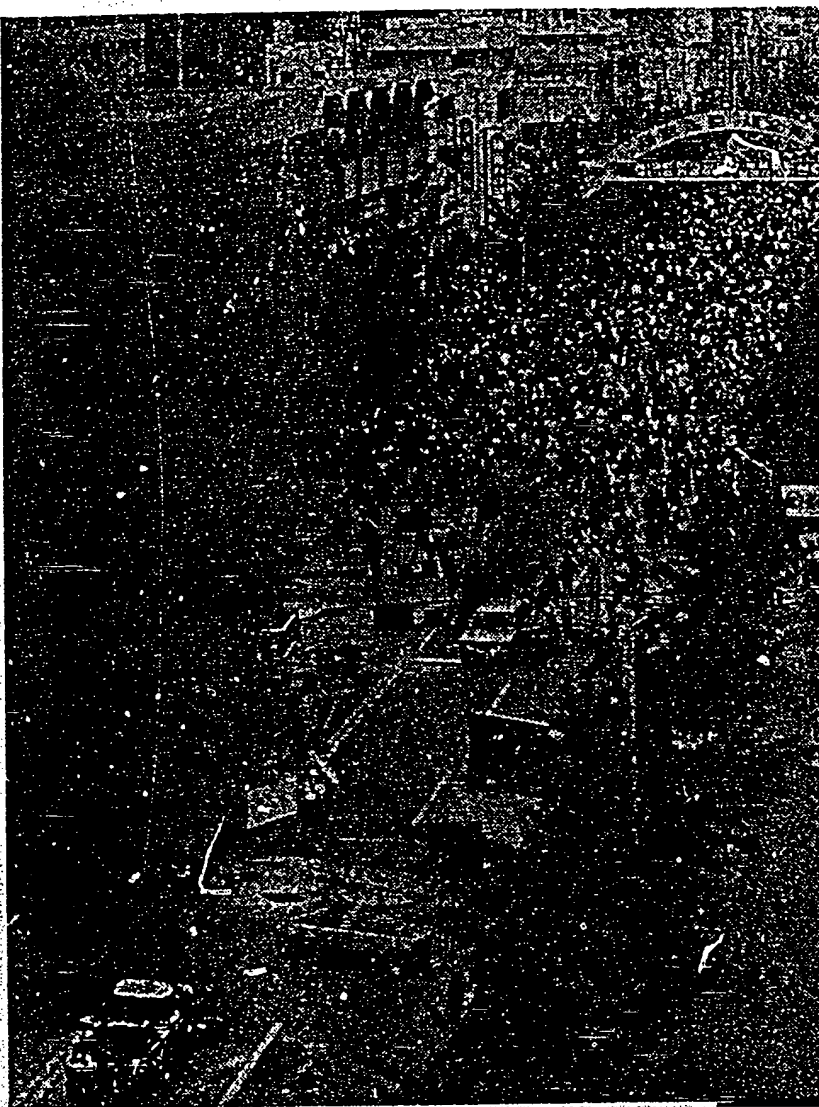
ment vacillated instead of drawing a hard and fast line on dissent.

The government thus gave the appearance of being not only untrustworthy but ineffective. The economy was in a deep slump, with a 30-percent inflation rate and over 800,000 unemployed; many companies were in financial trouble, and some were unable to pay back wages. Workers rejected the government's wage guidelines; the ensuing strikes, sit-ins, and violence culminated in riots at the Sabuk coal mine in April.

Minor incidents were blown out of proportion; speculation was rife, and politicians were given nearly complete freedom to criticize the government, to make demands, and to appeal for public support. This atmosphere of free thought and free speech encouraged further criticism of the system, and thus fostered the impression that the social fabric of the nation was unraveling and that the country was moving quickly toward chaos.

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*Rioting in Kwangju in May 1980*



The Kwangju insurrection last May was the climax of the antigovernment turmoil. It was not, however, symptomatic of any widespread revolutionary current. Initially it was a student demonstration

against the extension of martial law and the arrest of Kwangju's favorite-son politician, Kim Dae Jung. It escalated into a full-blown insurrection only when citizens became

enraged because Korean Special Forces troops used excessive force to quell the disturbances. Frustration over perceived discrimination against natives of Cholla Province fueled the rioting.

Not all elements of society despised the Yusin system, and few saw Park as an ogre. There was no groundswell of support for dismantling the system and

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its legacy. The burgeoning middle class had prospered under Yusin, and farmers were better off than ever before. The silent majority of Koreans may have welcomed a change, but they were not willing to go to the barricades for it. Most of them probably would have been willing to give the interim government a chance to work out its vague program for political development. As a result, the massive student demonstrations of mid-May met with a cool public reception. [redacted]

By the time total martial law was imposed on 17 May, some signs appeared of serious dissatisfaction among the liberals but little evidence that South Korea was on the verge of a national crisis. Farmers were more concerned with spring planting than with the constitutional revision. The anger of the workers was directed at labor union leaders for selling them out to big business. Moderate students felt caught up in the excitement of the mass demonstrations and the opportunity to be part of a historical event, but they were not angry; indeed, the demonstrations in Seoul on 13 through 15 May often were festive. The unrest certainly was not at the critical level. [redacted]

#### The Historical and Cultural Tradition

In addition to the reluctance of the beneficiaries of the Yusin system to participate in antigovernment activity, a mix of historical and cultural factors helps explain the dissidents' failure to enlist wider support. Korea's geographical position and its historical ties with China encouraged the development of a homogeneous people and the creation of a culture based on Confucian and Buddhist values. The system emphasized loyalty, filial piety, a strong family system, subservience to authority, and tolerance for inequality. Throughout the 500 years of the Yi dynasty—until 1910—Koreans lived in a stratified society under a monarchy based on the precept of loyal subjects paying obedience to benevolent rulers. [redacted]

The Korean people have thus been traditionally passive as long as the government has not interfered excessively in their daily lives. Only when government intervention exceeded permissible bounds did restiveness reach the point of localized peasant uprisings. This tradition of nonparticipation in the political process is still deeply rooted after 35 years of harsh Japanese colonial rule and another 35 years of independent but authoritarian government. [redacted]

Although the class distinctions have disappeared, the authority patterns—generally authoritarian and hierarchical—still exist in a somewhat weakened form. Institutional norms, likewise, are hierarchical and bureaucratic, with lower ranking officials deferring to those above and unwilling to contradict or to offer dissenting views. The government, therefore, is accustomed to governing by fiat and expects public obedience. The public, for its part, expects the government to govern humanely and justly. [redacted]

The government and the bureaucracy, however, are often insensitive and prone to excesses, more concerned with protecting their prerogatives and image than in being fair. They tend to meet any opposition uncompromisingly, on the basis of might-makes-right. [redacted]

#### The Impact of Modernization

Korea's modernization drive has produced a number of socioeconomic factors that challenge these South Korean political traditions. High education levels, increased social and geographic mobility, modern communications and transportation facilities, and an increasingly urbanized society with its anonymity and social pressures threaten Korean cohesiveness. Nonetheless, the impact of these factors has so far not been severe enough to destroy Korean traditions. The family, for example, though much weakened in urban areas, still exerts a strong influence; the old hometown still is the heart of the extended family and the refuge to which many return in hard times. Even urban life patterns retain a large measure of rustic simplicity. There is less of the sense of rootlessness in Korea than in many other rapidly developing societies. South Korea has no significant juvenile delinquency problem; divorce is still frowned upon; narcotics use among youth is negligible; and crime rates—particularly for violent crime—though increasing, are still comparatively low. [redacted]

Nonetheless, modernization has fostered a greater political awareness—if not sophistication—among the growing middle class and has made it simpler for dissident groups to form and to press their demands. Thus, the Park years witnessed the development of a highly vocal dissident minority demanding an end to Park's authoritarian controls and a greater voice in the

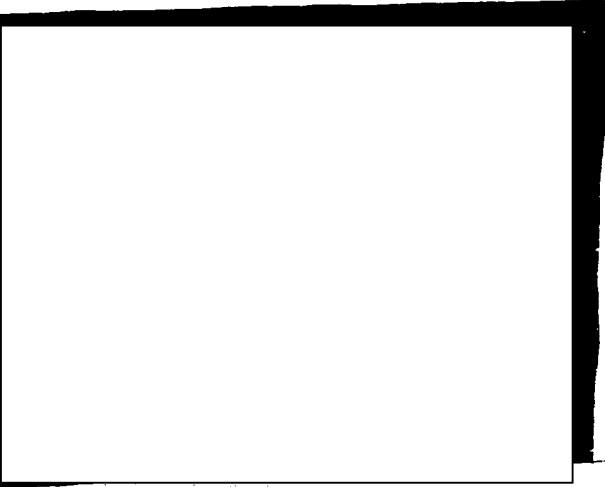


governing of the country. For a time, a rapidly improving standard of living tended to vitiate the appeals of such liberal dissident groups, but when the nation entered a period of economic downturn in late 1979 many South Koreans apparently began to question the wisdom of silently accepting the government's restrictions when there were fewer material rewards for doing so. [redacted]

South Korea's industrialization has, indeed, brought a steady improvement in the standard of living. The division of the material gains of industrialization has been, on the whole, more equitable than in most developing nations, but in recent years the imbalance between the haves and the have-nots has been growing. The potential for unrest lies not so much in the absolute differences between the haves and have-nots but in the expectation of the have-nots that they should be receiving a still greater share of the new affluence. The recent economic slump is adding another dimension to this problem. Although the unemployment rate is only about 5 percent, large numbers of unemployed youth and laborers in urban centers near industrial complexes could cause problems, as they did in Pusan and Masan during October of last year. [redacted]

**Forces Inhibiting Change and Instability**

Three key factors help to mitigate the effects of economic change and to blunt the activities of anti-government groups: the conservative nature of South Korean society, a generally favorable popular perception of the government, and a deeply rooted fear of North Korea. [redacted]



*Perception of Government.* Koreans traditionally have tended to trust their government, to be unconcerned with its intricacies and to take for granted that it will do the right thing. Political apathy is thus the norm, and the public tends to evaluate the government's performance on the basis of its impact on daily life. The people accept a certain amount of official corruption but resent high-level abuse of power and the amassing of fortunes by bureaucrats. [redacted]

The government makes few compulsory demands on the citizenry. The most important ones are military service, reserve training, and the New Community Movement. Military conscription and reserve training generally are felt to be necessary and equitably enforced. Although many farmers resent the huge debts they have incurred in complying with the demands of the New Community Movement, the movement has tended to reinforce traditional and productive behavior patterns such as frugality, diligence, and respect for authority. It also has served to make the government more responsive to farmers' demands, thus further enhancing the government's influence in the countryside. In addition, a fairly stable echelon of administrators at the local level provides continuity during times of crisis or of change in higher level personnel. [redacted]

<sup>1</sup> The New Community Movement, instituted in the early 1970s, is a rural development plan designed to promote modernization through a comprehensive, government-supported self-help program. [redacted]

**Fear of North Korea.** Although much pro-Communist sentiment existed in South Korea during the late years of the Japanese occupation and the period immediately following World War II, the North Korean invasion of 1950 destroyed the idealistic image of Communism among the general populace. Park, in order to stifle criticism of his regime, repeatedly exploited the widespread popular fear—which still exists—that Kim Il-sung had not abandoned his plan to take over the South and that the North is only waiting for the right time to launch a new invasion.

[Redacted]

Many of the people born after the Korean war, however, are influenced by the economic boom of the 1960s and 1970s, and appear to be less concerned with the dangers of another North Korean invasion. They can be expected to press for concessions concerning "liberalization" and to expedite some form of political contact with North Korea. For the time being, however, the older generation will continue to act as a restraining force, and its perception of the North as an aggressor will buttress the regime's political program. Recent North Korean attempts to infiltrate agents into the South make the regime's task easier.

Closely linked to this concern about North Korea is the fear of economic chaos, which the regime can be expected to manipulate to maintain stability. Many Koreans realize that continued political and social turmoil could lead to a cutoff of vitally needed foreign capital. With the specter of widespread unemployment and labor unrest the alternative, most members of the middle class may be willing to restrain their desires for political liberalization.

**The Threat From Political Pressure Groups**  
Political parties and most interest groups in South Korea traditionally have been weak and ineffective. Under Park Chung Hee political parties struggled to gain power through constitutional means, using the National Assembly as a forum. The public, however, frequently belittled the politicians—progovernment and opposition alike—as selfish and having little concern for the nation or their constituencies.

[Redacted]

Under any new political system that may ultimately evolve, parties probably will remain ineffective as innovators in political development and as forces for change.

Dissident intellectuals—who tend to be urban, Christian, university educated, or in some other way Westernized—generally possess neither the powerful organizations nor the media channels to lobby effectively for change. They thus rely on face-to-face communication to gain adherents. Under martial law, press controls will prevent the mass media from promoting "undesirable" change.

Only three major domestic groups have either the numbers or the organization to pose any kind of threat to the existing political and social order: students, Christian groups, and labor.

**Students.** South Korea's 300,000 college and university students form the vanguard of the antigovernment dissident movement, but they cannot force change on the government without large-scale off-campus support. The students view themselves as the conscience of the nation and do not hesitate to levy unacceptable demands on the government. Street demonstrations are one of the few outlets the students have for expressing their demands, which in recent years have consisted primarily of calls for political liberalization.

Although the students have asked for the resignation of national leaders, they have not demanded that the existing social and economic system be abolished. A few students are of course, sympathetic to a drastic change in the social system.

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The student movement is characterized by an intense activist leadership but a generally cautious, moderate following whose lackadaisical study habits leave time for good-natured participation in antigovernment activities.

[redacted] Since they failed to capture popular support during the demonstrations in May, the students may be less willing now to attack the government and the military, particularly in light of the military's heavyhanded suppression of dissent. Moreover, students also have been unsuccessful in getting labor support.

The military has stated that it will permit campus autonomy if the students refrain from engaging in politically related activities. The students are likely to reject this offer, and the military will find it difficult to enforce any such ban.

**Religious Groups.** A number of Christian groups are active in promoting labor, human rights, and social justice causes, which in the past have often led them into confrontations with the government. By most standards the Christian action groups are not extremist or radical, but they are liberal in the Korean context. Although Christian activists draw upon a large pool of

churchgoers for support—nearly 20 percent of the population claims to belong to a Christian church—this pool is overwhelmingly conservative.

The military has told the religious community that it will not tolerate its activities in politically sensitive areas. This prohibition—and the bloodshed at Kwangju—will make it difficult for dissident clergymen to persuade their flocks to undertake anti-government activities. Conservative clergymen are likely to counsel moderation for the time being.

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**Labor.** Korea's labor force of 14 million is a potent force for change. It also represents a potential for violence and revolution. Labor's interests generally are local rather than national, and material rather than ideological. Many workers still receive substandard wages in sweatshops that are unsanitary and dangerous. Many work for companies that operate on a narrow profit margin that makes it difficult for them to grant wage demands. And with the exception of a small number of modern enterprises with forward-looking management, most employers offer little or no job security and few benefits [redacted]

Such conditions provide fertile soil for Christian activists or labor organizers. Despite some well-publicized successes, however, union organizers have not attracted large numbers of adherents. Management has used economic pressure and physical harassment to discourage workers from forming unions. Moreover, many labor leaders still lack credibility among the workers because they often are corrupt or have been co-opted either by management or by the government. Union leaders also are more conservative and perhaps more realistic than the membership at large about labor's achievable goals [redacted]

Only 7 percent of the work force is unionized; indeed, union activities are restricted by law. Under Park, union leaders adopted a strategy of passive cooperation with the government, while lobbying cautiously for the interests of the membership. Many benefits accrued to labor under Park's economic policies: employment opportunities and job mobility increased, and wages and working conditions improved. The majority of South Korea's workers, therefore, probably prefer to work through the system rather than confront the government. Most suppress their demands for wage increases, hoping economic conditions will improve next year [redacted]

Early this year, however, the labor movement was more confrontational and more strident in its demands for reforms. Wage and contract disputes increased during the first quarter of this year, and unpaid wages were over three times the figure for last year. During April and early May, many labor groups staged sit-ins and other forms of job actions [redacted]

Thousands of unemployed workers in urban centers near industrial complexes pose a difficult and volatile problem for the government. Many jobless youths joined in student demonstration in Pusan and Masan last October, wreaking widespread havoc that led to the imposition of martial law. The government now is planning public works projects to provide jobs, and is encouraging businesses not to lay off workers but to shorten the workday and cut down on overtime [redacted]

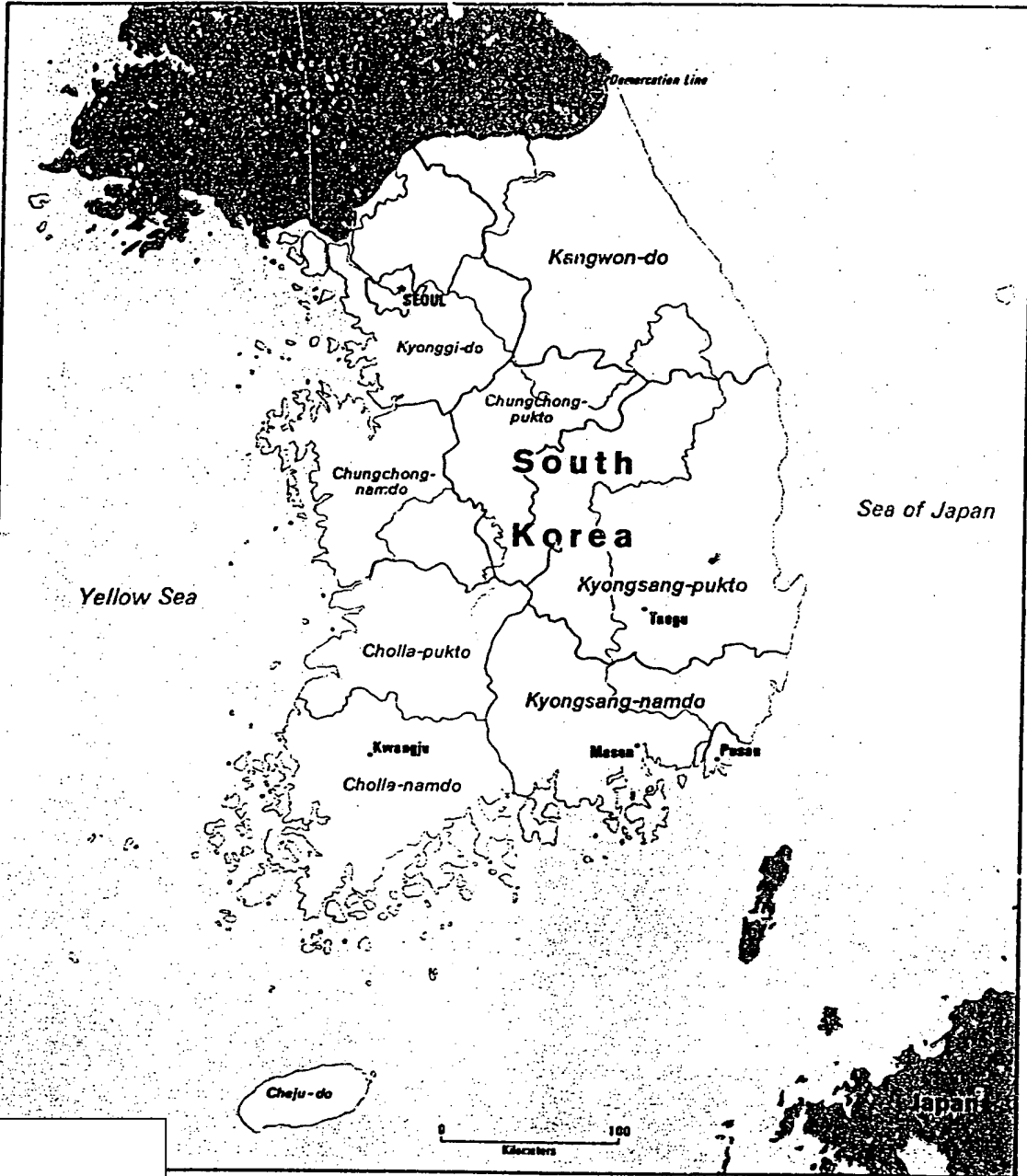
**Regionalism.** Despite the homogeneity of the people, strong regional variations exist as a result of differences in historical development reinforced by linguistic peculiarities. Factions based on provincial association have existed throughout Korean history and have played a significant role not only in politics, but also in economic and cultural affairs. Traditional biases have led to severe social discrimination against the people of the Cholla area. Other Koreans stigmatize Cholla natives as cunning and untrustworthy and often are reluctant to hire them or select them as marriage partners for their children [redacted]

Throughout most of the post-1945 period, natives of Kyongsang Province have tended to dominate the political scene, especially under Park, who was a Kyongsang native. In the 1971 presidential elections, which pitted Park against Cholla politician Kim Dae Jung, regional bias was evident as Cholla voted heavily against Park. Many Koreans believe that Park was irritated by his rejection by the Chollas and that he deliberately attempted to deny to Cholla the economic benefits he gave to Kyongsang and other provinces [redacted]

Chun Doo Hwan and most of his military allies are from the Kyongsang area and appear determined to perpetuate Kyongsang's domination of South Korean politics [redacted]

The Kwangju insurrection demonstrated the emotional dimensions of Cholla regionalism and its potential for violence. Nonregional factors, however, elevated the Kwangju riots to the crisis stage, and there is little likelihood that such regional antipathies alone would give rise to widespread revolutionary resistance. [redacted]

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### The Crucial Role of the Military

Although the majority of South Koreans are not prepared to go to the barricades, most of those who were unhappy with Park's repressiveness can take little encouragement from Chun Doo Hwan's rapid ascension to the presidency. For the moment, they have no alternative but to avoid confrontation with a government that clearly is prepared to react severely to any direct challenge. Nonetheless, radical elements such as students and Christian activists are likely to try to instigate confrontations with the government if—in the short term—there is a detectable relaxation in the regime's vigilance, or if—in the longer run—Chun clearly has made no moves toward a modicum of political liberalization.

The new constitution stresses traditional political patterns that will conflict with the values of the three pressure groups—students, religious activists, and labor—but the constitution is in harmony with the attitudes and interests of many of the entrenched power elites as well as the rural populace. These latter elements will support the military-dominated government unless it proves excessively despotic. Economic concerns, moreover, are likely to override social and political considerations.

The military has demonstrated that, unlike the early interim government, it is willing to resort to force to suppress dissent. This fact will deter many dissidents from engaging in confrontational tactics. At the same time, the greater danger of government force increases the attractiveness of dissent for a small number of radicalized students whose causes thrive on violence and who are determined to challenge the military and the government, perhaps by using terrorist tactics.

*Press Censorship.* The military's absolute control of the mass media is a significant factor in its ability to control dissent. Under the present censorship guidelines—which are likely to remain in effect for some time—the media are not permitted to criticize the government or its policies, even indirectly. Although the intellectual community and students probably have access to otherwise unavailable information, they have no means of distributing it or their views to the Korean people. Other military measures to control the flow of information include stern prohibitions against listening to North Korean radio-broadcasts, the forced removal of television antennas capable of receiving Japanese stations.

*"Purification" Measures.* Chun and the military also have benefited from a series of "purification" measures—in effect, purges—aimed at removing people, institutions, and ideas that are seen as causing corruption and inefficiency, weakening traditional values and ethics, and creating class conflict. These moves, plus a number of far-reaching educational reforms, have won Chun the support of the general public and the grudging admiration of many intellectuals. Chun's pledge to

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work for a "democratic welfare state" has also won him the solid backing of the underprivileged classes, who see him as champion of the poor

[REDACTED]

Many of the reforms—like those of Park—will fall into disuse or will have to be revised to meet political or economic exigencies. As the effects of the "purification" wane, Chun may find that some of his public support is also weakening. Given the dim prospects for any sudden improvement in the economic situation, Chun will be hard pressed over the coming months to maintain his popularity, much less to carry through on his "campaign promises."

[REDACTED]

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