

# Korea's Rough Road to Democracy

By Donald P. Gregg

**O**n October 17 2013, I took part in a one-day conference in Seoul titled Dialogue with Ambassadors. It was sponsored by the Korea Foundation in Seoul and the Center for Strategic & International Studies in Washington, DC. Participants were six former Korean ambassadors to Washington and five former American ambassadors to Seoul, of which I was the earliest, having served from 1989–1993.

There was general agreement among the eleven participants that the Korean-American alliance was in very good shape after a long series of ups and downs. No doubts were raised about South Korea's status as a powerful, functioning democracy. Relations with North Korea were seen as a major problem, along with the rise of China and Japan's inability to deal honestly with its past, but no one seemed to feel much urgency in dealing with a rapidly changing situation in Northeast Asia. I felt there was a bit too much complacency expressed by the conference participants.

In my remarks, I noted that it was almost exactly forty years ago that I had arrived in Seoul as the CIA's chief of station and that since then I had had dealings with all of Korea's presidents, beginning with Park Chung-hee. I opined that Korea had produced three outstanding presidents: Park (1961–79), who laid the foundations for South Korea's dynamic economic growth; Roh Tae-woo (1987–92), the vastly underrated president whose Nordpolitik policy brought recognition to Seoul from Beijing, Moscow, and all the eastern European countries; and Kim Dae-jung (1997–2002), the peacemaker whose Sunshine policy led to the first North-South Korea summit meeting in 2000. I commented that President Park Geun-hye, Park Chung-hee's daughter, has an opportunity to become Korea's fourth truly significant president, but only if she reaches out in a significant fashion to North Korea via her Trustpolitik policy.

I expressed concerns about the passionate political schisms among South Korean society concerning North Korea and said that these widely diverging views would be a real political test for President Park Geun-hye, should she seek substantial accommodation with P'yongyang.

This view was supported by former Ambassador Hong Seok-hyun, a senior journalistic publisher, who cited the presidency of the late President Roh Moo-hyun (2002–07) as "revealing the two strong undercurrents in Korean society." By that, he meant that President Roh, a liberal who sought to continue the Sunshine Policy of Kim Dae-jung, was so excoriated by his very conservative successor, President Lee Myung-bak (2007–12), that he committed suicide.

Less than a week after our conference had concluded, an October 23, 2013, article in *The New York Times* illustrated these "undercurrents." In describing the involvement of South Korea's intelligence service in seeking to influence the recent presidential election, the *Times* author wrote:

*Since Ms. Park's inauguration, South Korean politics has been paralyzed by scandals, including the one surrounding the spy agency. Rival political rallies have rocked downtown Seoul in recent weeks. Student activists demanded reform within the intelligence agency. But older, conservative Koreans have encouraged the agency, known by its abbreviation N.I.S., to wipe out North Korean followers from the National Assembly and cyberspace.<sup>1</sup>*

In June 1973, when I first arrived in Seoul, Park Chung-hee had in 1971 narrowly defeated Kim Dae-jung in a hard-fought presidential election. Fearing Kim's growing political power, Park had put into place the Yushin (restoration) system, which allowed him to hold power indefinitely. Kim Dae-jung, first in the United States and later in Japan, criticized these political changes. In the United

States, he had been harassed by hecklers organized by the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, a "polemical" intelligence agency of enormous power, much more interested in crushing domestic political opposition to President Park than it was in seeking to develop significant intelligence on North Korea. KCIA's director, Lee Hurak, was the second-most powerful man in the country.

In August, Kim Dae-jung was in Japan and continued his direct attacks on Park and the Yushin system. On August 8, Kim was kidnapped from his Tokyo hotel room. Ambassador Philip Habib in Seoul called me into his office and said, "I know how things work around here. They plan to kill Kim, but if you can tell me by tomorrow morning who has him and where



Meeting with (counter-clockwise) Joint Chief of Staff Chairman Colin Powell, Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney, Ambassador Donald P. Gregg, and Admiral Charles R. Larson in Seoul 1992. Photo courtesy of author.

he is, we may be able to keep him alive.” I was able to give that information to Habib early the next morning. He astutely informed President Park in a fashion that allowed Park to save both Kim and his own face. A “rogue element” in KCIA was blamed for the kidnapping. In October 1973, KCIA admitted that some of its officers had kidnapped Kim and expressed regret over the incident.

This news immediately triggered student demonstrations on several university campuses. Students at Seoul National University, the most prestigious university in Korea, were particularly vociferous in their protest. KCIA immediately cracked down and arrested an American-trained SNU professor, falsely accusing him of stirring up the student protests. The unfortunate professor was taken to a notorious KCIA interrogation center where he was tortured, either to death or to the point where he jumped out a window and killed himself to escape further pain.

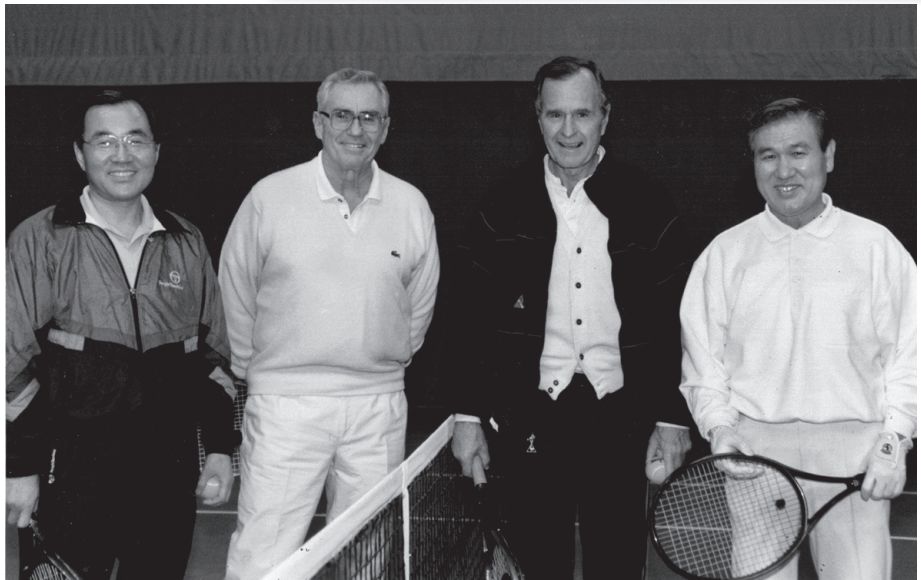
I quickly learned what had happened and reported it in full detail to CIA headquarters. I followed this report with a request to register a protest with the Korean government about what KCIA had done. The CIA division chief to whom I reported, a man who died over a decade ago, sent me a reply that I shall never forget. It was short and to the point: “Stop trying to save the Koreans from themselves. That is not your job. Just report the facts.”

I brooded over this message for a day or so, and then, for the first and only time in my CIA career, I disobeyed orders and went to the head of the Presidential Protective Force (PPF), a Korean official with whom I had developed a solid relationship. I told him that I was speaking personally and that I had not been ordered to register a protest. I knew that this man knew what had happened to the SNU professor, as it had become an open secret within Korean officialdom. I told my friend that what had happened was unworthy of what Korea sought to become and that I felt extremely uncomfortable dealing with an intelligence organization more focused on crushing domestic political protests than in working against our common adversary, North Korea. The PPF commander, looking extremely sober, thanked me for what I had said.

A week or ten days later, Lee Hu-rak, the KCIA director, was removed from his position, fled the country, and went into hiding. He was located in the Caribbean, arrested, and jailed. His replacement was a former justice minister who immediately issued a directive banning torture by the KCIA. The new director appointed as one of his chief advisers Hyun Hong-choo, a brilliant lawyer trained at Columbia University. Hyun and I have been friends for forty years, and he was ambassador to Washington when I was ambassador to Seoul.

I cite this incident as one of the clearest examples I know that illustrates the impact of student protests on the way Korea is governed. I may have played a small role in focusing the protest toward the top of the ROK government, but without the student protests, nothing would have happened to change KCIA’s draconian role. The tortured professor was a true martyr to the cause of democracy.

Following Director Lee’s removal, I developed close working relations with the PPF commander and the new KCIA director. We



Tennis in Seoul 1992 with (counter-clockwise) ROK President Roh Tae-woo, US President George H.W. Bush, US Ambassador Donald P. Gregg, and ROK Ambassador Hyun Hong-choo, at left. Photo courtesy of author.

often talked about President Park and how powerful he was. I told both men that Park needed to have a “minister of bad news,” a senior official with enough courage to tell Park what he did not want to hear but needed to hear. This item was passed along to Park, and I was told that in response he smiled but said nothing.

Park stayed too long in power and became more austere and isolated after the killing of his wife in August 1974. An assassin sent from Japan by North Korea shot at Park, who was making a speech in a large auditorium in Seoul. The shot missed President Park but killed his wife sitting behind him. My friend, the PPF commander, had to take responsibility for this tragedy and was replaced by a bizarre, ambitious man with whom Park took to long bouts of drinking.

Kim Dae-jung, despite periods in jail and under house arrest, continued to fight for free elections; human rights; and a more open, democratic government. He was often accused of being a supporter of North Korea. In 1976, he issued a “Declaration of Independence” that stirred large demonstrations in Seoul, and was immediately arrested. Kim was charged with instigating an illegal, anti-government insurrection and was sentenced to a five-year jail term. He was released after serving about two years and placed under house arrest.

The election of Jimmy Carter in November 1976 ushered in one of the most difficult and turbulent periods in the US-Korea relationship. Carter and Park were polar opposites in many ways. Carter was appalled at Park’s human rights record. It had also become known that South Korea, under orders from Park, had embarked on a secret nuclear weapons development project, which we were seeking to stop. Park saw Carter as a weak, untrustworthy man whose desire to withdraw US troops from Korea deeply angered him.

Tensions on university campuses ran high, and demonstrations were at times almost continuous—some against the US for “abandoning” South Korea who had supported us strongly in Vietnam, and others against the ROK government for its harsh human rights violations. Within the top levels of the ROKG, there was finger-pointing going on about who was responsible for dealing with the riots. At a dinner and drinking session with President Park late in October 1979, Cha Ji-chul, the PPF commander, accused Kim Jae-kyu, the KCIA director, of incompetence.



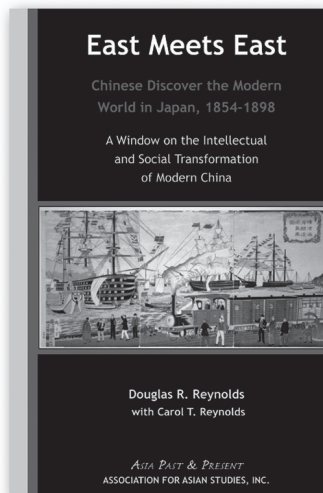
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Kim Jae-kyu became enraged and killed both the president and the PPF commander.

This violent scene ushered in a chaotic period in which a hard-line general named Chun Doo-hwan maneuvered himself into position to stage a coup against the interim president, former Prime Minister Choi Kyu-ha, and seize power as president in May 1980. Kim Dae-jung was arrested on May 17. Riots immediately broke out in Kwangju, capital of Cholla-namdo Province and Kim Dae-jung’s center of power. Chun, having declared martial law, sent paratroopers into the city to crush the rioters, killing more than 200 citizens in the process. Chun then blamed Kim Dae-jung for stirring up the riots in the first place. A military tribunal subsequently sentenced Kim Dae-jung to death.

I was then on the National Security Council Staff at the White House, and on December 4, 1980, President Carter sent Secretary of Defense Harold Brown and me to Korea to see if we could secure Kim Dae-jung’s release or commutation of his death sentence. We met President Chun, who correctly judged us to be representing a president he did not like and who was about to leave power. He paid little or no attention to our requests. But when incoming President Reagan took up Kim Dae-jung’s case, Chun agreed to release him in return for an invitation to the White House. Kim Dae-jung came to the United States and studied at Harvard. I met Kim Dae-jung for the first time in 1982, when he visited Washington, DC.

On that futile visit to the Blue House, I encountered the late Kim Kyung-won, who was then President Chun’s chief of staff. He seemed to be virtually alone. I was delighted to see Kim where he was, as I knew him to be a brilliant, resourceful, and democratically oriented political scientist. Kim Kyung-won had escaped from North Korea in late 1950, graduated from Williams College (my alma mater) *magna cum laude* in 1959 and earned his PhD from Harvard under Henry Kissinger’s tutelage. After teaching at York University in Toronto and New York University from 1966-71, he returned to Korea and became a professor at Korea University. In 1975, Kim Kyung-won moved to the Blue House as an adviser to Park Chung-hee and was retained by Chun. He later served as Korea’s Permanent Observer to the UN (1981-85) and as ambassador to the United States, 1985-88. Kim Kyung-won continued to write and teach until his death in 2012 of Parkinson’s disease. He was a huge loss to Korea’s intellectual community.

Kim Kyung-won and I, as Williams graduates, had become close friends during my first tour in Korea, and we stayed in close touch over the next thirty-five years. I opened my remarks at the October 2013 ambassadors’ conference by saying how much I missed seeing Ambassador Kim and the late Jim Lilley, who preceded me in Seoul. As a result, Korean friends gave me a copy of a book that came out in September that year in tribute to Kim Kyung-won, appropriately named *Agonies and Aspirations of a Liberal*, published by the International Policy Studies Institute, and affiliated with JoongAng Books. The following quotes are from that book.

Paul Evans, a Canadian professor at the University of British Columbia, knew Kim Kyung-won well and had worked with him in forming the Canada-Korean Forum in 1995. (Both men had taught at York University in Toronto.) Evans has a long essay on Kim in the book, called “Between Truth and Power, Kim Kyung-Won, 1936-2012.” It gives deep and rare insights into Kim’s thinking:

*Unfortunately, there is no written record in memos, diaries or interviews about Kim’s role in the Blue House during five years with President Park and the transition to Chun Doo Hwan after the assassination in December 1979. . . Later he provided*

a glimpse into his Blue House experience in a presentation he gave in November 1994 to his former colleagues in the Department of Political Science at York University. . . he argued that there was no single road to democracy in Asia. . . he spoke about how the Carter administration's plans to reduce the US troop presence in Korea and its criticisms of human right policies, while sincere, had the opposite effect [sic]. The Blue House took "merely cosmetic" steps to address human rights' issues and used "native nationalism" to distinguish Korean from US interests. Alternatively, Ronald Reagan was not a champion of human rights but the quiet signals and gestures of his officials had maximum effect in constraining Chun's response to the June 1987 pro-democracy demonstrations.<sup>2</sup>

Evans also apparently recorded this remark by Kim Kyung-won during the 1994 presentation:

"I worked for the three authoritative governments in South Korea that were certainly not headed by Jeffersonian democrats," he said. "To understand these governments you need to either be a complete cynic or have a sense of history. Democracy comes only if the bricks are laid one at a time and are accompanied by economic modernization. Eventually, it becomes inevitable, the only possible choice. In South Korea, authoritarian government became untenable because the Korean bourgeoisie would no longer tolerate being treated like children. Democracy comes not for ethical, moral, or idealistic reasons but rather for pragmatic and practical ones. The foreign role in the coming of democracy to South Korea was minimal."<sup>3</sup>

I underlined the last sentence because it is a powerful statement from the man who was commonly referred to as "Korea's Kissinger." In my last substantive talk with Kim Kyung-won, two or three years before his death, I asked him if he planned to write a memoir. He said he was reluctant to write honestly about his experiences in the Blue House while those involved were still alive. I said, "By that you are referring to Chun." He nodded and said quietly, "All the things I kept Chun from doing will probably never be known."

I have always wondered what caused Chun Doo Hwan to agree in 1987 to hold a direct presidential election, as that decision, in my view, was the single most decisive turning point toward the establishment of South Korean democracy. I now think that Kim Kyung-Won's restraining influence on Chun was the key, keeping him from another brutal crackdown such as he had engineered in Kwangju seven years earlier.

So there was Kim Kyung-won on the inside, in the Blue House, pushing conservative presidents toward moderation. And on the outside was Kim Dae-jung, a man who was leading the fight to establish democracy in Korea. He ran unsuccessfully for president three times, in 1971, 1987, and 1992; was jailed, kidnapped, and imprisoned; survived an assassination attack (a truck tried to run him down); and had his eldest son tortured by the KCIA to the point of disfigurement. His son proudly limped in his father's funeral procession, which I attended in 2009.

Kim Dae-jung was finally elected in 1997 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for holding the first North-South Korean summit meeting in 2000. But still, he was feared and hated as a possible "secret Communist" by older, conservative Koreans. Nick Kristoff, writing in *The New York Times* of July 12, 1987, limned Kim Dae-jung's eternal impact on Korean politics this way: "Almost nothing sets Koreans quivering in either anticipation or horror as much as the possibility of a bid for the presidency by Kim Dae-jung."<sup>4</sup>

**"Democracy comes only if the bricks are laid one at a time and are accompanied by economic modernization." — Kim Kyung-won**

Such feelings persist today. One of our oldest and dearest Korean friends wrote us a letter after Park Geun-hye's election early in 2013, saying that Park's election had "rescued" Korea from radicals who threatened its freedom and democracy. The "radicals" referred to in this emotional letter were those supporting Moon Jae-in, the narrowly defeated presidential candidate, a highly educated moderate who placed improved relations with North Korea toward the top of his political agenda and was a strong supporter of Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy.

South Korea is still riven by generational and regional differences that inhibit a full-blown attempt at reconciliation with North Korea. The ultimate triumph of South Korean democracy will only come when it feels confident enough about itself and its internal political processes to confidently extend the hand of friendship and reconciliation to P'yongyang. Park Geun-hye is well placed to make such a vitally important move. Whether she has the strength, courage, and confidence to make such a move is yet to be determined. ■

#### NOTES

1. Choe Sang-Hun, "Investigators Raid Agency of Military in South Korea," *The New York Times*, October 23, 2013.
2. Paul Evans, "Between Truth and Power, Kim Kyung-Won, 1936-2012," *Agonies and Aspirations of a Liberal*, ed. Han Sung Joo (South Korea: International Policy Studies Institute, 2013), 40-42.
3. *Ibid.*, 42-43
4. Nicholas D. Kristoff, "Chun Foe's Plans Stir South Korea," *The New York Times*, July 12, 1987.

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DONALD P. GREGG served as the US Ambassador to Korea from September 1989 to February 1993. Prior to his service as Ambassador, Gregg worked for the Central Intelligence Agency for thirty-one years, with assignments in Japan, Burma, Viet Nam, and Korea, where he was chief of station from 1973 to 1975. He also served as National Security Adviser to Vice President George H.W. Bush for six years. From 1993-2009, Ambassador Gregg served as chairman of the Korea Society. Gregg, who holds a Williams College BA in Philosophy, was decorated by the Korean government in 1975 and has earned numerous awards, including the Kellogg Award for Career Achievement from Williams College in 2001. In 2009, the Maxwell School at Syracuse University established the Donald P. and Margaret Curry Gregg Professorship in Korean Studies in honor of the Greggs' achievements. Since 2012, he has been Chairman of the Pacific Century Institute in Los Angeles. Gregg is strongly interested in establishing normal relations with North Korea, a country he has visited six times. The Pacific Century Institute actively supports unofficial meetings between Americans with significant experience in Korea with North Korean officials.