

A Case Study of 'Developmental Dictatorship': The impact of militaristic ideology on the social fabric of the Republic of Korea

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Abstract

This paper explores the military regimes of South Korea, specifically the impact of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan's governance on creating a resilient and autonomous culture. Michael Desch (1999) argues that in times of low external threat and high internal threat, it is justifiable to use military rule contrary to the traditional military professionalism theories supported by the likes of Samuel Huntington. Cassandra Birchler (2012) argues that this leads to the military acquisition of political decision-making power which leads to exclusive interest seeking of the oligarchical bodies. This paper provides an exception to this by dissecting the case of South Korea whereby the military was used to align people to a group culture and nationalistic sentiment and to equip people the autonomy to work efficiency in the economy. Ultimately, this paper proposes that the militaristic ideology worked as an adhesive in creating social cohesion and sustaining social development in South Korea.

Keywords: Republic of Korea, Militaristic Ideology, socio-economic development, dictatorship.

President Park Chung-hee's Militaristic Ideology

Park rose to power after he led a Coup on May 16th, 1961 which overthrew Rhee Syng Man, the first president of the country. Park was reportedly, a very ambitious soldier, he repeatedly compared himself to Napoleon, remarking on how his dream to become a soldier, impoverished childhood, and even his height was similar (Kim, 2010). "Military spirit was [becoming] entrenched deeply into the bones of President Park; he literally became an 'avatar of the military'" (Kim, 2010). Hence, comradeship, hierarchy of ranks and patriotism became the defining features of his rule.

Park constantly gathered his military connections when he needed to act decisively. Prominent figures in the Coup, such as Lee Hanlim, Lee Juil, and Kim Dongha were all graduates from the Manchuria Military School, where Park was initially admitted (Kim, 2019). The Chosun Media described Park's comradeship stating, "The Manchuria Network was famous for having strong cohesion based on tight personal relationships. Their political orientation to make and reform society and the country with this unity was strong." (Cho and Lee, 1998) This was the type of militaristic ideology Park stood for. The Manchuria Network opposed the weak governance of the Rhee Syng Man who took liberalism to the extreme, providing little to no regulations and imposition of law. The collective vision for the state was to lead it decisively and centrally for the sake of achieving economic development in the short run. Park valued the soldiers' devotion to this ideology and believed that having them in positions of power would consolidate the government to prioritize the development of the nation. Park replaced many policymakers with his generals and commanders, effectively replacing corruption with another form. This corruptive behaviour was, in Park's eyes, the necessary and lesser evil. He committed himself to exterminate corrupt politicians and unreasonable laws but turned blind-eyed over the government's actions with a greater cause.

One of Park's greatest beliefs was that economic development was a prerequisite of social development. He was ready to sacrifice a whole generation for the future of Korea (Choi, 1988) so that Koreans down the line of history could be better off and survive as a power in the global stage. In loose translations, Park affirmed, "The survival of one generation is finite, but the country and its people's lives are eternal. The country and its people's lives, brought up by the sweat of today's generation, is eternal." (Oh, 2006) Park believed that democracy and liberalism

was only achievable after a certain standard of living was achieved. He maintained that it would be the step forward in years to come. However, looking back at Ryee Syng Man's era, it resulted in minimal control of the state apparatus and only allowed those who were ready, such as the Chaebols, to exploit the system. With the loss of power domestically, Park feared that external forces will endanger the nation. As an ethnic nationalist, he valued the Korean nationality and vowed never to return to a submissive position the nation encountered during the Japanese Colonial Era or the US command. We can refer to such governance as 'developmental dictatorship' (Yi, 2006).

President Chun Doo Hwan and President Roh Tae Woo's Militaristic Ideology

Unlike Park, who rose to power slowly, proving his abilities to military officials, Chun took power by himself and used the instability of the nation to his advantage. According to President Roh's testimony, the plan to eliminate the Chief of Staff was established right after the death of Park, and Chun just waited for the perfect timing to strike (Jung, 2017). In addition to this, it is known that Chun was in conflict with the Chief and President Choi about the jurisdiction of the investigation into Park's assassination and the appointment of military personnel to senior positions. The power struggles in the government resulted in a successful revolution that marks the loss of then President Choi Gyu Hah's practical authority in the government. Chun coerced President Choi to appoint him as the Chief of the Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and eventually become the President after the resignation of Choi taking responsibility of the KCIA and the government's suppression of democratization protests throughout the country.

Chun and Roh all underperformed in the military academy resulting in slower promotion compared to other classmates. Chun entered the military academy from the reserves list after failing the first stage of the entrance exams. In the academy, he never received a distinction and always came in near the last of the cohort in academic and practical performance. Roh, on the other hand, started as ranked tenth but in subsequent years fell down the ranks and graduated as 67th. Another member of the Hanohoe, Park Byung Ha, even had to retake a year because he did not meet the academic requirements for progression (Kim, 2020). Contrary to Park, who excelled in every category, the Hanohoe struggled to impress military officials and was often overlooked in promotion and appointments. Chun Doo Hwan stood out when President Park assembled the academy students to support the 05.16 Coup. The elites within the academy

known as the Chungjukhoe refused to support the new regime, so Chun showing more loyalty to Park was able to climb up the ranks during Park's administration (Kim, 2020) and eventually became part of Park's Presidential Security Service (Presidential Archives, 2019).

Although it is difficult to assume without contestation, it can be argued that Chun and Roh were opportunistic leaders with the motive to assimilate power and authority. The governance of Chun introducing liberalization and cultural cultivation was less of an attempt to develop the nation than his way to draw attention away from politics and the authoritarian military regime. However, these policies that acted to cover up the controversial aspects of society were also able to grow social cohesion and perpetuate the Korean culture to the global stage. The side effects of the military regime were able to develop the nation socially and economically, and these policies individually may be regarded as positive factors to the development of South Korea.

Park Chung Hee's Influence on the Culture

Since its birth, Korea has been threatened by neighbouring powers such as China, Japan, Mongolia and Russia. Due to its geographical importance and relatively small size, the Korean Peninsula was constantly subjugated by bigger states. However, it is uncommon that the entire nation loses in battle to a different country. More often, Korea's weak governance was coerced or co-opted. In the case of the Japanese Colonial Era, the transition of the Chosun Dynasty into the Chosun Empire left the monarchs undefended; and with the rise of the pro-Japanese elites, the nation was sold off without resistance in exchange for personal gains. The nation previously bound by a century of ethnic, religious, and social solidarity no longer had a king to look up to and the citizens slowly realized that they have been wrongfully denied sovereign rights and human rights which entitles them to a nationality. Between 1910 to 1945, Koreans resisted the illegal occupation by establishing the Provisional Government in Shanghai, going out to the streets to protest, and secretly learning the Korean language and culture through censored literature. The decades of oppression built a spirit of resistance and spread the defensive national self-determinism which is one of Woodrow Wilson's 14 objectives necessary for world peace (U.S. Embassy & Consulate in the Republic of Korea, 2021).

When the Korean War started, national self-determinism led to the general public wanting to participate in combat to protect their own ideology and people. In 1951, the Korean Government mandated all physically and mentally capable citizens above the age of 18 to provide mandatory military service. However, those that were not required to provide service volunteered and a minimum of 20,000 Student Soldiers between the age of 14 to 17 volunteered and 2,464 of them passed away in battle (Lee, 2016). Furthermore, Koreans share a distinct military culture that extends to social life after discharge. Identifying your affiliated unit and cohort is a customary introduction to a senior and sharing anecdotes of military experience is a popular topic of discussion. The military experience creates groupism and national self-determinism that provides social solidarity that restored some of the fragmentation in society caused by ideological conflict and material depreciation.

Park established the national identification system, tracking every citizen and mandated total control over the military services. Through this system, just by checking a card, one could know where one's family was from, where they spent most of their life in, and even where they made travels to. In the past, those who avoided the military services were tracked individually but with this system, it was easy to label military avoiders and served an alternative purpose of stigmatizing them as anti-nationalists or communists. The growing stigma around not going to the army translated to the growing link of the army to being a Korean person. Park's idea of patriotism was ethnic-nationalism and clearly defining who was a true Korean was one of Park's main objectives for development.

The biggest impact of military culture proved to be how it conditioned its young adults to adjust to the social structure and hierarchy. The functionalists such as Talcott Parsons argue that secondary socialisation transitions individuals from the particularistic standards of the family to the universalistic standards of society. At home, one can sleep as long as they want, eat whatever they please, and have a relaxed hierarchical structure where the parents provide for their children. However, in society, everyone is judged under the same criteria of effort and must follow a certain lifestyle such as coming to work on time or following orders from seniors. The army trains young adults to accept orders without questions and keep a mechanical manner that improves efficiency and decreases revolutionary sentiments. Soldiers learn to adapt on an ad hoc basis to the orders given to them even if they are irrational and purposeless orders. (Cho,

2003). In the highly hierarchical and bureaucratic structure of the Korean economy, the leadership characteristics are very similar therefore the military prepares young adults to be obedient.

The ad-hoc adaptation of orders creates a risk-chance oriented thought process. The strong deceive the weak and the weak look for the chances to rise to power through the hierarchy (Cho, 2003). For example, until recent appreciations of employee rights, many employees were forced to work extra hours in order to impress seniors that granted promotions and this was considered a norm. Even in the army, those performing well were able to call their families more often or go out on vacations. The military represented the competitive structure of the economy and absorbed the young adults into believing in meritocracy. The government and firm adopted entrance exams to adopt the bureaucracy and this had a synergic relation with the belief in meritocracy. Workers worked hard creating innovative and clever strategies even under inefficient environments and constantly blamed themselves of the organization's underachievement. According to Evans (1995), this phenomenon can be described as the 'embedded autonomy'. As Hecksher and Ohlin argued, the social and systemic characteristics that rise as a side effect of development may have an impact on the construction of comparative advantages for the economy (Evans, 1995). Although the development priority policy led to overcommitment to the neo-liberal ideology and created a severely individualistic and competitive culture, an efficient and cunning workforce was ideal in the eyes of President Park (Hong, 1993).

Highly selective meritocratic recruitment and long-term career rewards create commitment and a sense of corporate coherence. Corporate coherence gives these apparatuses a certain kind of 'autonomy'. They are not, however, insulated from society as Weber suggested they should be. To the contrary, they are embedded in a concrete set of social ties that binds the state to society and provides institutionalized channels for the continual negotiation and renegotiation of goals and policies. Either side of the combination by itself would not work. A state that was only autonomous would lack both sources of intelligence and the ability to rely on decentralized private implementation. Dense connecting networks without a robust internal structure would leave the state incapable of resolving "collective action" problems, of transcending the individual

interests of its private counterparts. Only when embeddedness and autonomy are joined together can a state be called developmental.” (Evans, 1995)

Even after Park’s era, this culture still dominated the lives of Koreans and in times of crises such as the IMF bailout in 1997, the citizens sacrificed their personal wealth such as gold to restock the national reserves that ran dry due to overspending and mismanagement of economic booms. Park’s militaristic rule was able to create a sense of responsibility for the citizens to care for their own country which did not exist during Rhee’s government.

Alongside the embedded autonomy that self-regulated the efficiency and productivity of firms, Park used the bureaucratic structure to scrutinize businesses. The low private sector activity and the inability for private access to foreign capital meant that the nation could not rely solely on market mechanisms to bring out economic growth (Ministry of Strategy and Finance, 2014). Therefore, the Economy Planning Board was established to coordinate the Economic Development 5-year Plans which led to economic growth. However, there were unintended consequences of this economic growth. The voices of the new social class, labourers and students, rose in defence of their human rights. Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan contributed to the consolidation of group culture to face this issue. Throughout their rule, the spread of communist sentiments or the invasion of North Korean spies were given as justification for the use of violence and surveillance systems. By embedding constant fear of war and enemies nearby, they were able to exterminate any opposition and assimilate more people into the exclusive group identity as a South Korean and stigmatized the protestors as an anti-nationalist body. Citizens feeling defenceless following the Korean War and Rhee Syung Man’s decentralized governance felt that this type of government was needed. The ideal type of government in this era was one that was authoritarian, ethnic-nationalist, and centrally commanded.

An example of this type of anti-communist strategy can be seen in the Case of the Committee for the Rebuilding of the People’s Revolutionary Party. On April 25th 1974, the KCIA released a statement stating that the Committee for the Rebuilding of the People’s Revolutionary Party was using an undercover organization known as the National Democratic Youth and Student Alliance to coordinate riots and violent student protests (Cha, 2014). The Committee was

allegedly receiving orders from North Korea to create a communist government in South Korea and the students involved were communists themselves when in fact they were reading poems about democratic progress and protesting against Park's dictatorship. On April 8th 1975, eight students were sentenced to death under charges of conspiring for civil war and violence and just a day after the sentencing, they were executed without any further retrials or consideration. During this period, the Red Complex, the fear of the communist ideology, was sufficient for the public to accept the sentencing. Chun continued the human rights infringement of family members by forcing them to confirm that their children and brothers were indeed spies and even followed them everywhere they went to monitor what they were saying. Consequently, the innocent students and their families were socially isolated and could not even get employed because of the red line in their criminal records. This fabrication by the KCIA was officially recognized in 2002 and the sombre day of execution is now considered as the 'Dark Day of Judicial History' by the International Bar Association (Chosun Ilbo, 2005). Military governance fabricated lies and used defamatory methods to create an obedient and unified society. Although this reduced the social instability that was essential to economic development, this malicious policy was a step backwards in terms of social progress. Park's conviction was that he could sacrifice a whole generation to prioritize economic growth and that economic growth was the precondition to social progress. This policy adequately achieved his aims but must be criticized for its human rights violations.

It is important to remember that he led massacres to suppress the rise of democracy, overrode the constitution by declaring the October Revitalizing Reforms that enabled his powers of the presidency to be equal to that of a dictator, and faces criticism for allowing unfair competitive structures to materialize in the culture of Korea. Park's idea of nationalism can be characterised as populism; and for a newly industrialized country that requires stability to develop, populism, creating 'groupism' and nationalism, it was effective. President Park believed that he could only bring about economic progress through central planning and oppressive invigilation of the public.

Chun Doo Hwan's Influence on the Culture

President Chun faced one of the most unstable starts to the regime following the resignation of President Choi and the Gwangju Democratization Movement (Gwangju Protest) (Office of the

President, 2003). The growing reluctance of the Choi Regime to introduce democratic change sparked revolts all throughout the country. Starting with the Bumahangjaeng or the Busan/Masan Uprising caused by the expulsion of Kim Young Sam, leader of the New Democratic Party and 14th President of Korea, from the National Assembly, the national protest demanding the withdrawal of the martial law spread to the city of Gwangju by May 18th, 1980 (Lee and Kwak, 1999). Chun, then chief of the KCIA, ordered martial law and locked down the province of South Jeolla and the city of Gwangju and sent in paratroopers to restrain protestors. The police brutality led the citizens to join the rally and they eventually stormed police stations stealing weapons. 18,000 riot police and 3,000 paratroopers were initially assigned to Gwangju but the escalating tension led the government to retreat on May 20th, 1980 with the city of Gwangju declaring that it was free from the dictatorship of the country (Han, 2020).

Outside of Gwangju and Jeolla, the citizens did not have a clear idea of what was happening as the media controlled by the government censored all the police brutality and the scale of the protests. On May 27th, 1980, the military authorized the use of tanks, helicopters, and advanced automatic weapons starting a massacre (Han, 2020). Until 1988, the 05.18 Democratization Protest was wrongly framed as a riot under the orders of North Korea (Naver Knowledge Encyclopaedia, 2021). This strategy of the military government was the same as that of Park's regime. President Chun, leading the nation's biggest massacre in modern history, was able to avoid the blame (Jang, 2011) and could sustain his rule until 1988.

Chun also affirmed that internal crises must be avoided to prevent it from weakening the nation from external threats. In July 1982, Chun referred to international disputes such as Poland, Iran-Iraq War, and the Falklands war to affirm that any reason could be given to start a war in the 80s. In one of his addresses to the nation in 1984, he even said that the world was heading into a new world war (Kang and Jung, 2011). As Koreans were only allowed complete free travels abroad in 1989 (Kim, n.d.) and news about from abroad was carefully monitored and selectively displayed to the public. Therefore, Chun's world about the external threat was one of the only credible accounts of the world which increases fear and trust in the government. Following up on Park's critique of the nation's irresponsible spending habits, Chun also affirmed that corruption, negligence, carelessness and laziness were moral sins (Kang and Jung, 2011) and said that in order to be recognized as a power in the global stage, the nation needed to develop.

Chun needed to keep the bonds of society closely knitted and public attention to the military government was deterring this from happening. To divert the attention, Chun introduced the obscurantist three-S policy represented Screen, Sports, and Sex (Presidential Archives. n.d.). After the introduction of free trade under the World Trade Organization's guidance, Korea had an influx of foreign culture from Japan and the United States. This caused a problem for Chun as the democracy and liberty within those countries looked desirable for citizens who were stuck in an authoritarian society. Following the abolishment of the night curfew, lasting from 1945 to 1982 (Son, 1995), the government allowed the screening of the first late night movie, *The Ae-ma Woman*. This adult film gained so much popularity to the point that it was said that students spent the day protesting and the night in the cinemas. This policy, alongside the implementation of the colour television expedited cultural enrichment and directed the public attention away from politics. During this time, the nation increased the number of participatory shows such as the University Music Festival and cultivated K-Pop which in the long run propelled South Korea to show one of the strongest cultural influences in the world (Gibson, 2020). Not only did it reinforce solidarity by providing a common interest of entertainment, sports and media was able to make the citizens proud of the nation which was not common during this era. Furthermore, Chun sought to be recognized as a legitimate government and wished to remove its title of illegally extorting power away from the Choi Administration. To be recognized internally and externally, Chun advocated to gain the hosting rights of international sports events such as the Asian Games and the Olympics (Cho, n.d.) by establishing pro sports and sports infrastructures such as stadiums and ruling organizations. The nation was able to focus on a single goal in a highly fabricated period in its history and was able to show the world that Korea was no longer one of the most deprived nations of the world. This ambitious plan was able to sustain Chun's rule for 7 years during which Korea developed economically and socially. However, the militaristic rule and the rising liberalization could not coexist eventually pulling Chun down from the seat of power.

The continuous efforts by Chun and Park finally gave in to the demand for democracy in 1987 following the death of Park Jong Chul and Lee Han Yeol. On January 14th 1987, Park Jong Chul being investigated about the whereabouts of Park Jong Un, a prominent member of the national protest, was murdered as a consequence of police violence. Although initially trying to

hide this fact saying that the death was caused by a stroke, Oh Yeon Sang, doctor in the ChungAng University Hospital, released a statement saying that torture using water may have killed Park Jong Chul (Minju Road, n.d.). Protests continued throughout the spring and summer and eventually on June 9th, 1987, Lee Han Yeol, student at Yonsei University, was hit by a smoke grenade and killed, at this stage the democratization movement spread rapidly. Within 20 days, the Chun Government was overwhelmed to be able to function as a government. The nation bonded by ethnic-nationalism and 'groupism' included the government as part of the nation, however, the oppression and violence shown by it led the citizens to shorten the definition of the South Korean people to exclude the military governance. When democratic elements are transplanted in an authoritarian society, the mobilizing cost for the citizens decrease as they have a higher chance that their voices will be heard and less of a chance that they will be punished. The identity that keeps the nation together would strike back to destroy the military rule in Korea.

This resistive nationalism is central to the civic culture of Korea. In 2016, the Korean people again protested against the extortive corruption of Park Geun Hye, 18th president of the Republic of Korea. For 20 continuous weekends, people gathered in major streets of the country and lit up their candle lights as a symbol of peaceful resistance (Chang, 2017). With this effort, Park Geun Hye was impeached which marked the first impeachment of a democratically elected president. This event also saw many Chaebols in front of the judges for corruption as well signifying a new wave of democracy after more than 50 years of extortion and predatory governance. The resistive nationalism signifies that the citizens propel an inclusive political and social system where their common interest and rights as a citizen is protected. South Korea currently has an official online petition platform that promises all petition with more than 200,000 people within 30 days will be directly addressed by high level government officials and most commonly the President. In the eight months from August 2017 to mid-May 2018, a total of 160,000 petitions were filed. (Kang, 2018) Inclusive political systems that stems from the resistive nationalism is what propels social development in South Korea.

Conclusion

The policies of Park and Chun consolidated the nation into one and were able to create and maintain social solidarity during troublesome times. Although the nation was fragmented in the

sense that the civil society was disjointed with the government, keeping a strong bond between the people was essential especially after the Japanese Colonial Era, where many Koreans turned their backs on their home country, and the Korean War that divided one ethnic-nation into two. Although it can be argued that military culture slowed economic growth, the military was able to prepare its citizens to adopt a neo-liberal mindset of meritocracy and this was able to bring out diligent economic growth even during crises such as the IMF bailout. The 'groupism' and resistive nationalism has stimulated Korea to reach a new stage of development beyond economic growth and democratic progress but to be recognized as a global superpower in terms of wider social progress and soft power. The decades of violence and oppression must be recognized and rightfully criticized but the military governance of Korea established a developmental road known as the 'developmental dictatorship' that no other country has ever shown. For this reason, the military governance of Korea must be granted credits to the development of the Republic of Korea.

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