

# The Political Role of the Korean Military: The Making of the Third Republic

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A military *coup d'état* of May 16, 1961 toppled the government of the Second Republic, a regime that had been in office for only nine months. The regime of Premier Chang Myŏn (John M. Chang), the political heir to the bloody "Student Uprising" that had violently overthrown the twelve-year-old First Republic of President Syngman Rhee, disintegrated as the armed units of the "Military Revolution" poured into the South Korean capital. The bloodless coup, the very first military take-over in modern Korea, was personally masterminded and commanded by then Major General Pak Chŏng-hi (Chung Hee Park), who since December 17, 1963, has been the President of the Third Republic.

The inglorious demise of the Second Republic signified more than the fall of a hopelessly impotent regime. It marked a turning point in the political evolution of the southern half of the divided peninsula of Korea. In broad terms, the evolutionary cycle had traversed the following six phases since World War II: the jubilant phase of decolonization; the frenzy of nation-building activities; hurried importation of democratic institutions and processes; their rapid degeneration into autocracy; a spasmodic and spontaneous rejection of the autocracy; and an attempted rejuvenation of democracy without critical and detached scrutiny of the existing political realities of South Korea.

It might be worth while to note briefly a few salient aspects of the substructure of the Korean polity on the morrow of her liberation from the Japanese colonial rule, because the political evolution in the post-liberation period was conditioned by them. Briefly, the Japanese colonial domination denied the Koreans opportunities for normal development into modern nationhood. In terms of participation in government administration, for instance, the Japanese colonial policy evidently called for a virtual Japanese monopoly of higher-level administrative positions. In 1943, two years before the termination of the thirty-six-year Japanese rule, there were only 733 Koreans out of a total population of some 25,000,000 in the highest administrative ranks (*Chokumin* and *Sonin*), while 4,025 Japanese occupied equivalent positions in Korea.<sup>1</sup> Only 37.6 per cent of the intermediary rank (*Hannin*) were Koreans, while 64.9 per cent of the clerks, secretaries, and other lowest-rank employees were Koreans. The total number of Koreans occupying any official positions, including the lowest, was 80,752, or less than 1 out of 300 Koreans.

An advisory body for the Japanese Governor-General, called the Central Council, was created in 1910. However, during the thirty-odd years of its existence, the Central Council had been consulted mainly on matters of native custom and beliefs. No measures of any importance were referred to this appointed body of Koreans. Furthermore, the court systems in Korea were operated largely by the Japanese under Japanese laws, though a small number of Koreans participated in legal processes toward the end of the Japanese domination.<sup>2</sup>

In the educational field, the picture was equally dismal. Only one out of every one thousand Koreans was a graduate of a college-level institution in 1944, the year before Korea was liberated.<sup>3</sup> Practically all of those Koreans who were fortunate enough to receive college-level education were children of privileged landed or moneyed classes. They constituted the indigenous elite group that tended to perpetuate itself within the Japanese empire.

Toward the end of World War II, however, another avenue to prestige and power opened in militarist Japan. A Korean might rise by joining the officer corps of the imperial Japanese

army. Some ambitious but less privileged Koreans entered the Military Academy of Manchukuo, the puppet state of Japan. Upon completion of military training in the Japanese satellite state, some Koreans could even hope to complete regular courses at the Military Academy in Tokyo, the West Point of Japan. Graduation from the Tokyo Military Academy assured a place under the Japanese "sunflag." Pak Chông-hi, for example, entered the Manchukuo academy in 1940 and graduated from the Military Academy in Tokyo in 1944. However, almost nothing is known about his life as an imperial Japanese army officer.<sup>4</sup>

If Korea's political milieu under the Japanese occupation was that of a tightly regimented, efficient police state that arrested normal development of the Korean nation, it was to experience a two-fold liberation at the end of World War II, when Korea was freed from the external, alien Japanese domination. South Korea under the American occupation was, at the same time, freed to a considerable degree from the internal regimentation. General Douglas MacArthur himself, the most powerful and idolized soldier-statesman in entire East Asia following World War II, declared: "Nothing shall prevent the Korean people from becoming free men of a free nation."<sup>5</sup> Well-meaning but inept soldier-administrators of the United States Military Government scurried about to meet the unaccustomed task of not only ruling a "liberated people" but also establishing Western democracy in a re-emerging but debilitated East Asian nation. It was a task far more complicated and strenuous than building a "Teahouse of the August Moon."

The political freedoms and systems that the Americans imported to South Korea were balling gifts to the Koreans, whose political culture was so vastly different from the one that has nurtured Western democracy. Because a historical pattern in Korea had been one of the introduction of ideas and "institutions from the outside, with a minimum concession to the values and behavior of the people,"<sup>6</sup> because the American occupation authorities showed a certain messianic zeal to democratize South Korea along with Japan, and because democracy seemed to signify modernity and respectability, the new Korean elites eagerly and hastily embraced democratic systems for the new Republic

of Korea inaugurated on August 15, 1948. As the Koreans "elected" the National Assembly, which in turn "elected" Princeton-educated Dr. Syngman Rhee as the first President, a republican superstructure was officially established amidst pomp and flummeries.

It soon became evident, however, that many "democratic" features of the new constitution were not applicable to Korean realities. Many articles of the "borrowed constitution" tended to become "decorative documents." While some members of the new ruling elite proudly parroted flawless democratic jargon, their deeds belied their idealistic pronouncements. Furthermore, there was an abysmal gulf between this elite and the Korean masses, who were, after all, only a few wobbly steps away from their demoralized existence in colonial Korea. The superstructure of the Republic of Korea appeared modern, but its substructure was traditional. The country began to suffer from political schizophrenia.

The origins of military coups are "often obscure, and the intentions of those staging them mixed."<sup>7</sup> A few major factors which contributed most to the coup in Korea indicate the nature as well as the built-in limitations of political upheavals in that country.

The first factor was that recognized and recognizable political leaders proved incapable of governing the re-emerging nation to the general satisfaction of the governed. Since the establishment of the Republic, scores of political and administrative leaders had emerged before the expectant public. Most of them disappeared from the scene as quickly as they had appeared. The instability and exasperation that must have been felt among the ruling elite, and the public's disillusionment, were most graphically reflected in the frequency of turnovers among the cabinet ministers. In the government of President Rhee, the mean tenure of ministers was twenty-two months, while it was only six months in the regime of Premier Chang.<sup>8</sup> In both governments, Home Affairs Ministers, who controlled the country's police force, were most frequently ousted, their average tenure being seven months in the Rhee regime and less than two months in the Chang cabinet.

A whole generation of leaders took part in the dizzy game of musical chairs. Again in regard to cabinet ministers, in the nine-month life of Premier Chang's cabinet, a total of 74 ministers headed the thirteen ministries at various times. In an eight-year period between 1952 and 1960 under President Rhee, there were 311 cabinet appointments for the thirteen cabinet posts. It was a vicious circle: ministers were replaced in quick succession because they did not solve problems quickly enough, yet they could not do so because they hardly had enough time to learn their tasks.

The bankruptcy of leadership was complete, and so was the people's disillusionment with the ruling elite. It was probably natural that the disenchantment was more keenly felt by the officer corps of the army that had physically borne the burden of defending the Republic.

The second major factor which contributed to the atmosphere that culminated in the coup was the desperate economic situation in South Korea. Per capita annual income was only about \$105 in the last years of the Rhee regime. A great majority of the Korean people looked to the Chang government for a magic cure for their economic ills. At the request of the Secretariat of the State Affairs Council (cabinet), eight universities conducted an opinion survey in November, 1960. The survey groups questioned three thousand South Koreans in various provinces about, among other things, their "most urgent requests to the government." Leading items in the responses were as follows:

Relief measures for the unemployed	20.8%
Price stabilization	17.9%
Adjustment of price of farm products	13.8%
Clearance of usurious loans to farmers and fishermen	11.6%
Crime control and maintenance of order	3.0%
Equitable taxation	3.1%
Support of medium and small businesses	2.0%
Solution of housing problems	1.0%

Thus, over 70 per cent of South Koreans surveyed named the solution of economic problems among their "most urgent requests to the government." They would, therefore, support a government that would best solve these problems. It was probably

significant that only 3.7 per cent of the same group of Koreans surveyed expressed unreserved support of the Chang government, while 51.5 per cent said they would wait and see.<sup>9</sup> As it turned out, the economic ills in the divided and underdeveloped country were more deep-seated than most Koreans and their government appeared to realize.

The rate of unemployment in 1960 was 24 per cent, while the average retail prices in Seoul had continued to skyrocket. The battle cry of the Democratic party against the Rhee regime—"We can't make a living, so let's change"—could be readily turned against the now ruling Democratic party and the Chang government. Economically, the great majority of Koreans had very little to lose regardless of what happened to the regime.

The third major factor was the emergence of the armed forces as the most powerful and effective organization in the nation. Since the Korean War, the Korean armed forces have never been really demobilized. The military situation in the Far East and in the divided country itself necessitated a huge standing army, which, at its peak, was said to be the world's fourth largest standing army in terms of sheer numbers—surpassed only by the armies of Communist China, the Soviet Union, and the United States. In the name of the defense of freedom, South Korea had become an armed camp.

By contrast, most other organizations in the nation were embryonic or anemic. For a brief period, there appeared some hope that a two-party system might emerge in the political arena, but it proved to be illusory. President Rhee's Liberal party evaporated with his ouster. The Democratic party, the major opposition party during the Rhee period, revealed internal weaknesses when it became the ruling party, splitting into bitterly feuding factions and giving rise to the New Democratic party opposing the Democratic party.

This, of course, was not the first time that the Korean people had experienced exasperation with political organizations. The political scene of South Korea had been replete with parties—patriotic, social, paramilitary, and numerous other groupings. In the two-hundred-member First National Assembly that met from June, 1948, to May, 1950, for example, there were originally

forty-eight "parties and social organizations" represented.<sup>16</sup> The total number of organizations which had run candidates but failed to elect any far exceeded forty-eight.

All these groups had contributed little to political stability in Korea; instead, it became apparent that many of them had selfish goals and sometimes fraudulent designs. They were too often tools of ambitious politicians eager to advance their political fortunes by any means.

The army, meanwhile, had remained more or less aloof from the seemingly endless melee among the parties and countless other organizations. As all other organizations failed the people, the army—with its overwhelming physical power, its discipline, and its record of service to the defense of the nation—stood out.

The fourth major factor that contributed to the success of the coup was an increased political awareness within the officer corps. For years, the military appeared to accept the general pattern of civilian supremacy—following the example of its mentor, the United States. This pattern was not challenged when the constitutional commander-in-chief was self-confident and forceful. The strong-willed President, Rhee, commanded at least the grudging respect of army generals. This shrewd President kept the generals in their places by carefully timed and screened promotions, retirements, and assignment of some of the more ambitious ones to honorific diplomatic posts abroad.

Since the conclusion of the Korean armistice in July, 1953, the huge standing army had faced a prolonged period of relative inactivity, free from the gruelling daily challenges of the Korean War. Political upheavals abroad and within Korea must have come to their attention. Among the events which probably stirred the imagination of Korean officers were the uprisings in Egypt headed by the Society of Free Officers that led to Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser's assumption of the Egyptian presidency in 1956, the emergence of General Ne Win as the strong man of Burma in 1958, and the seizure of political power by General Ayub Khan of Pakistan in 1958.

These developments abroad coincided with a period of disorder at home—brazen election rigging in which the top echelon of the Korean military was deeply involved, the gradual break-

down of military discipline from the top down, and the complete breakdown of civilian leadership. These stimuli came also at a time when many of the military officers were receiving college-level education both in Korea and in the United States. Their attention was beginning to be focused on political problems.<sup>11</sup>

Then the Student Uprising of April, 1960, cracked the thin veneer of order covering the nation's profound socioeconomic and political disorder. Characteristically, President Rhee declared martial law, but the army under the Martial Law Commander, Lieutenant General Song Yo-chan, showed no inclination to shoot at demonstrating students. In fact, the army seemed to remain neutral in the fight between the Rhee regime and the demonstrators. With the very life of the Rhee administration trembling in the balance, this inaction by the army constituted a political decision by the military command. The significance of the role of the military in bringing about the ouster of the Rhee regime was not lost on the officer corps.

With Rhee out, hopeless divisions bewildered civilian politicians and rendered them incapable of governing a nation in turmoil. Conditions were now ripe for the armed forces to intervene in the political sphere.<sup>12</sup>

The process of forming the Third Republic was influenced by the nature and limitations of the so-called "main force of the revolution," which engineered the coup and occupied many key positions in the military junta. The nucleus of the revolutionary forces was originally composed of a small group of army officers who were lieutenant colonels in 1961. They were members of the class of 1949, or the eighth graduating class, of the Korean Military Academy, who had constituted "the most discontented layer" in the hierarchical structure of the Korean armed forces.<sup>13</sup> They were sandwiched between the general-rank officers, many of whom were identified with the political fortunes of the First and Second Republics, and the company-rank officers, the work horses of the officer corps, who were preoccupied with daily chores.

What these lieutenant colonels initially decided to launch in May, 1960, was a "military purification movement" within the armed services with the apparent limited objective of dislodging from the military hierarchy some "corrupt and inefficient" gen-



erals who were the immediately visible targets of daily criticism by field and company-rank officers.

On September 10, 1960, soon after the establishment of the Chang regime in August, eleven lieutenant colonels attempted in vain to visit the Defense Minister and recommend to him their "purification" measures. Instead of meeting with the Defense Minister, the officers were taken to the provost marshal's office and severely reprimanded. That very night, they and a few other indignant young officers resolved to execute the coup. The time bomb had started to tick.

These "Young Turks" gradually gained the support of some generals who had been reputed to be dissatisfied with conditions in the armed services and the nation as a whole. With the entrance of Major General Pak Chōng-hi into active leadership of the revolutionary movement, the coup group secured the support of some 250 officers. They were to constitute the new military elite of the country following the military take-over that was realized some seven months after the resolution among the lieutenant colonels to topple the Chang government.

What was astonishing was the fact that an organization involving at least "250 officers of all ranks"<sup>14</sup> could be kept a secret—or an open secret—for several months. It either demonstrated almost superhuman mastery by all of the officers of the intricate art of clandestine activities, or the inability or unwillingness of the top-level Korean military commanders to command and supervise the officers. It also showed the fundamental lack of loyalty of all these officers, probably including the top-level generals, to the civilian government that constitutionally commanded the military. Under these circumstances, a relatively small number of officers intent on carrying out a coup could muster sufficient "weight"<sup>15</sup> to tip the scale.

Soon after the successful coup, all the superstructure and trimmings of republicanism, including political parties, were simply annulled, as were most civil liberties. The Military Revolutionary Committee was renamed the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction (SCNR). It was declared that the Council was now the nation's "supreme governing organ" with both executive and legislative powers, plus administrative control over

the judiciary. The Council was to be a tightly regimented, compact, and powerful nucleus of the revolutionary government. The number of the supreme councilors was to be between twenty and thirty-two. They were to be elected from among military officers on active duty "who are deeply imbued with the cause of the May 16 Revolution," according to the Law Regarding Extraordinary Measures for National Reconstruction. The tightly knit character of the Council was to be guaranteed by the provision that the councilors should be elected by the supreme councilors duly seated, meaning those who engineered the coup, "upon the recommendation of not less than five Supreme Councilors."

This compact body of military officers was to exercise all the legislative powers, and had the authority to adopt the budget bill by a majority vote with a quorum of two-thirds of the councilors. Theoretically, therefore, seven military officers could adopt a budget bill<sup>16</sup> for the entire nation if the size of the Supreme Council was kept at twenty officers. The votes of six councilors were sufficient to pass other legislation.

With regard to executive matters, the powers of the Council were equally sweeping. All executive functions were to be performed by a cabinet that was placed under the complete control of the Council. The Head of the Cabinet, or the Prime Minister, was to be appointed by the Council, and he would in turn appoint cabinet members "with the approval of the Supreme Council." The cabinet had to assume collective responsibility to the Supreme Council, which could remove cabinet members en bloc by a two-thirds vote of the councilors seated. The Council could remove an individual cabinet member by a simple majority vote.

Judicial affairs were placed under similar control by the Supreme Council. The Chief Justice and the justices of the Supreme Court were to be appointed by the President upon the recommendation of the Council. The assignment of other judges, including the chiefs of district courts, was to be made by the Chief Justice with the approval of the Supreme Council.

An abundance of new blood and youthful energy was a prominent characteristic of the new ruling group. It was a far cry

from the Rhee and Chang regimes, in which many older people, often in their sixties, were very much in evidence. Suddenly, a new breed of people of a younger generation occupied positions of overwhelming power. This fact was at once a point of strength as well as of weakness for the military junta as a ruling body. If the freshness and youth of the new elite promised a surge of vitality, it also meant almost complete lack of experience in politics and of sophistication in the intricate art of governing.

While "speechless citizens . . . just watched,"<sup>17</sup> the military junta quietly and quickly established a Central Intelligence Agency. The functions of the Agency were, among other things, "to co-ordinate and supervise activities of government ministries, including armed forces, concerning information and investigation of matters at home and abroad related to the ensuring of national security and the investigation of criminal activities."<sup>18</sup> It was headed by Colonel Kim Chong-pil, a central figure among "the main force of the revolution," a member of the class of 1949 of the Korean Military Academy, and the nephew through marriage of General Pak Chông-hi. Thus a powerful intelligence organization was formed.

Upon consolidating the military junta by expelling unreliable elements who had mostly played the role of "swing men" in the initial stages of the revolution, for example, General Chang Do-yông, Army Chief of Staff at the time of the coup, the junta now turned its attention to the purge of the "remnants of the old order," or what General Pak called the "trash—the old politicians"<sup>19</sup> in one of his three political treatises published under his name shortly after the coup.

Having boosted the prestige of General Pak, partly through his visit to the United States in November, 1961, the military government promulgated in March, 1962, the sweeping "Political Activities Purification Law,"<sup>20</sup> banning political activities by "old politicians" of all conceivable types and colorations—including the Democrats, New Democrats, Liberals, and leaders of "progressive groups"—for six years, until August 15, 1968. About two weeks after the promulgation of the purification law, the Supreme Council made a series of dramatic announcements listing 4,369 persons as political figures who would be automatically

barred from any political activities unless they appealed for screening and were cleared by a junta committee. Although the names of most accused "old politicians" were removed from the blacklist by January, 1963, the men had been effectively demoralized and discredited in the eyes of the public.

While "old politicians" were still shackled and straitjacketed by political purification measures, the military junta was organizing, as early as March, 1962, a well-concealed and -financed nucleus of a pro-military political party, masterminded by none other than Kim Chong-pil, director of the all-powerful Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>21</sup>

The military junta apparently recognized the inherent limitations of the military for mass political organization,<sup>22</sup> and recruited young, ambitious university professors, journalists, and even some bureaucrats, who were given intensive indoctrination at a training center headed by an official of the Central Intelligence Agency.<sup>23</sup> The training center secretly instructed organizers for the capital area in April and May and those for various provincial and local levels in June and July. By October, 1962, the "underground organization" was prepared to recruit new party members on a large scale through methodical screening by the central secretariat in Seoul and numerous provincial and local secretariats. Recruitment of known political figures was handled by Kim Chong-pil himself.<sup>24</sup> The tightly organized and well-lubricated party was being readied for unveiling in early 1963, when the military junta planned to hold elections.

While South Korea remained a hushed country under the stern rule by the military, the Supreme Council formed a Constitutional Deliberation Committee on July 11, 1962, comprising nine supreme councilors and twenty-one civilian advisers and experts, carefully chosen by the military. Within three and a half months after the organization of the committee, it had completed drafting a series of far-reaching amendments to the constitution. The Supreme Council unanimously approved the draft in November, and further proposed a December 17 popular referendum on it.

Martial law, under which the Korean people had lived since the May, 1961, coup was lifted on December 5, 1962, less than

two weeks before the proposed referendum, "to relax the political atmosphere." The military government subsequently announced that over 78 per cent of the participants in the referendum approved the drastic revision of the constitution. Thus the Korean constitution, which had been revised twice during each of the two preceding regimes, had been rewritten extensively for the fifth time in its fourteen-year history.

The most important feature of the "new constitution" was the restoration of a presidential system, somewhat similar to the one originally adopted by the constitution of 1949. In fact, the position of the President became far stronger than it had been during the First Republic of Dr. Rhee. Under the new system the State Council (cabinet) was downgraded to a consultative body that might "deliberate on important policies" (article 83), whereas under the former system it was empowered to "decide important state policy" (article 68), at least in theory. Among the newly granted presidential powers is the authority to appoint the Prime Minister without the National Assembly's concurrence. The President may also remove the Prime Minister and other cabinet members largely at his own discretion. Furthermore, no vice-presidency is established under the new constitution; it provides a presidential system pure and simple.

The second outstanding feature of the new constitution is the provision for a unicameral legislature which, according to the Supreme Council, is "to represent the single will of the people."<sup>26</sup> This legislative branch and the judicial branch under the new system were also made quite amenable to presidential policies. The strong President is also given the emergency powers "necessary to maintain the public safety and order." When he decides that public safety and order are menaced, he may mobilize the military forces or proclaim a state of siege of either an extraordinary or a precautionary stage. Under the state of siege, "special measures" may be taken with regard to "warrant system, freedom of speech, press, assembly and association, or with regard to the rights and powers of the Executive or Judiciary" (article 75). The freedom of the press, speech, and assembly may be totally suspended under the state of siege.

On the day after the promulgation of the constitution,

General Pak made a public announcement: "Considering the political situation, we (Supreme Councilors) resolved that it is fit for us to retire from active (military) duty, and play an active role in the future civilian government. . . ." He resigned from active military service on August 30 and on the very same day joined the Democratic Republican party that had been carefully prepared for the move under the direction of Kim Chong-pil. The presidential elections were to be held on October 15, just a month and a half after General Pak discarded his military uniform and became an "honest and conscientious" civilian. With the inauguration of Pak Chŏng-hi as President on December 17, 1963, the Third Republic of Korea was officially born.

Thus, the coup of 1961 and political development since then have been a manifestation of political underdevelopment in a re-emerging Asian nation. The rule by decrees of the military junta, and to a lesser degree, the rule by the highly centralized government headed by the soldier-president, reflect drastic readjustment of the "republican" superstructure to existing realities of underdevelopment. The political schizophrenia of the Korean nation might be said to have largely disappeared.

The coup and the developments since then, however, have not completely eliminated the problem of split personality. If the Korean polity until the recent upheavals was top-heavy on the liberal-democratic side, it is today unbalanced again. This time it is leaning heavily toward the side of autocracy. With the passing of Dr. Jekyll, Mr. Hyde is menacingly in evidence. In terms of Hegelian dialectics, the thesis stage of attempts at application of Western democracy may be said to be over, and the development since the coup may be characterized as an antithesis stage. The so-called "republican" period under Rhee and Chang lasted for thirteen years, and no one can predict the length of this antithesis stage.

Those who argue in favor of a prolonged autocracy, however, presume the permanence of political underdevelopment of the Korean nation. At the time of the coup the Korean masses had already begun to show a degree of political sophistication. The results of 1956 elections that forced Rhee to accept Chang Myŏn of the opposition party as his vice-president, and the 1963 elec-

tions in which the margin of General Pak's victory was slim indeed, despite the substantial and numerous advantages the pro-military Democratic Republican party enjoyed, might be cited as examples of such political development among the Korean mass. When these elections were relatively fair and free, the seemingly acquiescent Korean masses exercised keen collective judgment that stunned those in power. The spontaneous, violent Student Uprising that actually toppled a seemingly formidable Rhee regime is a constant reminder to the Korean masses as well as to their rulers that the Korean people are now capable of such opposition.

Now that the Koreans have formally lost many of their freedoms and the constitutional and legal bases for them, many of them are giving indications that they suddenly appreciate and miss such freedoms. This is particularly true among intellectuals, writers, students, and, of course, politicians in the opposition. They are seriously writing and debating about various aspects of democracy and modernization, and ways to attain them. In fact, the military revolutionaries showed inclinations for a short while after the coup to capture and ally with these intellectual groups. Some military revolutionaries apparently attempted to become the champions of dramatic modernization in Korea, but the honeymoon period between the military and the intellectuals came to an end rather quickly with mumblings of mutual dissatisfaction.

There has been mounting tension between the military-dominated regime and a group that might be called the "republicans" who are opposed to the regime. The interaction between them will decide the nature of the synthesis stage of the Korean development. At present, however, the military and its allies control not only the government and economy of the nation but also preponderant coercive forces.

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