

Park Chung Hee: An Enigma

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Here in Seoul, we've been running the debate over the role of Park Chung Hee in modern Korean history for a long time. It continues, among friends at dinner table, makkolli houses, university coffeeshops. The problem is that the Korean media don't do so. They should provide a balanced look on the past, and take lessons from it and yet they are too busy reporting and analyzing ad infinitum the barren stories of political triviality. The broad picture is neglected. George Santayana's warning springs back to mind: Those who forget history are condemned to repeat it.

We need a more balanced perspective on Park Chung Hee; not only because he casts a long shadow on Korea today, but few Koreans can claim to have been untouched personally by his rule. As a Korean national working for the foreign media including the New York Times, I also paid my share of price living under Park's harsh rule. I was under constant surveillance, taken in for questioning and sometimes subject to the kind of abuse I wouldn't want to repeat here. I saw Park Chung Hee's brutality firsthand. But I often wonder these days -- if he hadn't been around, where would Korea find itself today? Probably next to Cambodia (not to insult that beautiful country but to lament its horrendous history under Pol Pot, war with Vietnam and subsequent economic and political hardships that continue to this day).

In 1961, with the South Korea so riddled with corruption and incompetence, I am certain it would have lost the opportunity for development had it not been for the rise of Park.

Korea's economic growth reached 7-10% when Park's repression ran strongest, which convinced him his iron-fisted rule was justified. That was bad news for traditional powerbrokers: the conservative oppositionists, the media, students who had formed the bastion of the establishment power at that time. But it was a good time, I dare say, for a large number of other Koreans who formed the urban poor, the rural peasantry, the sort of underclass people who had no "connections" to avoid being drafted into military service during or after the Korean War.

I remember taking a tour of saemaul undong (new village movement) in 1975 to see the steady transformation of the tradition-bound Korean countryside -- village roads being paved, replacement of thatched roof with corrugated iron roofing, the kitchen innovation that brought stainless steel kitchen sink to Korean ajummas to cook and wash standing, not squatted on the floor. To them, Park indeed was a savior, a revolutionary chasing poverty away.

Around that time, tens of thousands of Korean men and women went overseas -- to Vietnam, to the Middle East, to Germany to work as gastarbeiters. They sent many millions of American dollars home. For the first time in Korea's history, they no longer desperately looked for jobs -- jobs were looking for them.

This is at least one reason why the subject of Park's 18-year rule still invokes so much ambivalence and ambiguity, not just hatred. In opinion polls, he still ranks the best leader Korea has had, way ahead of Kim Dae Jung.

But it was a different matter for people at the other end of social spectrum at the time -- former president Yun Posun, the scion of old Choson dynasty yangban class, members of the educated elites (university students, professors, the provincial powerbrokers, the media establishment). It was NO DOUBT tough for them! This is not to belittle their contribution to democratisation, only to underline the fact that the rise of Park meant transformation of the existing social order. The traditional power elite knew it. Mr Yun rose heroically to battle the military dictatorship.

But their struggle was unfolding within a bigger framework of social/political evolution that was taking place. The choice they faced was: either join the Saemaul Crowd (and learn from practice, as the old Deng Xiaoping might have said!) or perish into oblivion. I remember often asking the Oppositionists (Kim Dae Jung, Kim Young Sam, Yun Posun, Ham Sok Hon) how they would have lifted the country from poverty. Their uniform reply was -- bring back democracy and everything will be fine. They had no vision for economic development, nor a nation-building strategy.

Their chance came in 1987. We know the rest of the story. Corruption deepened, incompetence spread wider.

Before the collapse of President Suharto, I used to tell my Indonesian friends they shouldn't be too enthusiastic about Park's model of national development, only to be shot back this way: "Yes, Park was brutal, also corrupt but he at least placed three meals on the table of the people, even enlarged the size of their economic pie. But Suharto is brutal and corrupt, corrupt and brutal, with no food on our table!"

That makes you wonder what exactly do you mean by human rights -- which comes first: the food or freedom of dissent. Much of the Korean society under Park had at least acquiesced in his iron rule because they placed economic progress ahead of democracy. They were as much resentful of fat opposition politicians making frequent trips to Europe

and the US on taxpayers money; of businessmen building the foundation of their empire with meager salary to their workers; of certain journalists lining their pockets by riding on the coattails of the power elite as they were of Park's authoritarian style.

Now that all this is gone, and Korean newly weds can fly to Club Med vacation spots in the Maldives for honeymoons -- rather than to hotspots in Onyang as we used to do in the 1970s -- we are immensely relieved that the past is over. From time to time, the past still comes back to many of us in bad dreams and nightmares, but I tell friends in Korea and Indonesia that our experience was unique, it's not something that can be "exported" to another country. Nor should it be.

Park Chung Hee was a tough leader. He paid for his tough rule with his own life and that of his wife. Some of his Old Guards also paid a high price for their role -- Kim Hyung Wook, Cha Chi Chol, and so on met a terrible end. We condemn the way Park ruled, but let's also examine if Korea had alternative way to development under the rule of effete miscreants who posed as civilian democrats.