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KOREA Human Rights, past, present and future.

Warren Wilson College, Sept. 24, 1987

Having lived since birth through some of the darkest days of Korean history, my perspective is perhaps more optimistic than that of Dr. John Somerville. During my boyhood days, Korea was rigidly controlled against her will by Imperial Japan. Koreans who had been a people of serfs and slaves under their own despotic rulers, and who had never in history enjoyed what we Americans treasure as "human rights" were now systematically and brutally oppressed and exploited by a foreign power. Although liberated by the Allies at the end of World War II in 1945, she was prostrate and utterly helpless...stripped of any wealth she had ever had, pathetic by almost any standard, without leadership by Japanese intention, and divided at the 38th parallel by foreign powers...only to be further devastated five years later by the war with North Korea (1950-1953). That was enough for Koreans to discover that the communists had even less respect for human rights than all their past rulers put together. I was in Korea when the North Korean invasion began, ~~was~~ there as a missionary during 18 months of the conflict itself, and have lived there ever since shortly after the armistice was signed. Remember that for more than 35 years to this day, Korea has no peace settlement...only a very jittery truce.

Since 1948 when our family arrived in Korea, we have seen a nation transformed. In those days more than two-thirds of the people were rural, living in squalor, perpetually in debt, riddled with disease, and securely tied to the customs of centuries past. Cities were little better, with vast numbers living in shanties of cardboard with beer-can roofs. Only in urban areas was there electricity and that not too dependable. Telephone service was almost non-existent. With the possible exception of a few streets in Seoul, there were no paved streets or highways anywhere. There was almost no industry and jobs were scarce everywhere. There was no farm machinery, no chemical fertilizers, little secondary crops other than rice, and no secure system of marketing. What has happened in the meantime, to create a modern industrial society which exports automobiles and computers and a flood of textile products?

Politically we saw four eras, as Dr. Somerville has likely already reviewed.

1. Two months before we arrived, Dr. Syngman Rhee became president. He was a good man, a scholar, and a Christian...but increasingly his advanced age meant that he had little knowledge or control of what was going on as the officials surrounding him sunk into more and more corruption. In 1960, after a rigged election, students took to the streets, the president was forced to resign, and the vice-president and his powerful wife and two

sons shot themselves in a suicide pact. Seven years had elapsed since the end of the Korean War, but almost nothing had been done by this "democracy" in the way of progress in any field...farming, industry, education, social affairs, housing communications, etc.

2. The second period was a year of near anarchy. the constitution was revised for a cabinet-type government with Chang Myung (a Roman Catholic layman) as premier and Yoon Po-sung (a Presbyterian) as a weak figure-head president. But factionalism riddled the government, students who had toppled the Rhee government intimidated the police so that lawlessness and anarchy increased. Mobs ruled the streets, demonstrations were the order of the day (even the prostitutes demonstrated), economic life was paralyzed, unemployment and inflation sky-rocketed.

3. At this point (May 16, 1961), the military took over in a bloodless coup. It so happened that I attended a Presbytery meeting that morning in a city some 20 miles away. When I arrived, Presbytery business came to a halt as its members descended on me demanding that I go speak to the American Ambassador. Why? Here was the gist of their words: "After all the weak government and confusion in the streets we have had, we welcome this revolution because it is the only hope of our country to establish law and order. But your ambassador (actually a charge d'affaires named Greene) is using the American Armed Forces radio system (never done before) to broadcast in English with a Korean translation a message to our people to support the 'elected government' and not the military revolution. Don't you know that this is the best thing for our country now? But this radio broadcast could encourage some of our generals to lead their troops against Park Chung-hi in Seoul contrary to the will of the people...and we would have civil war and terrible bloodshed." I did not feel I could intervene with the US embassy, but I did pass along to the commanding officer of a small US missile base nearby what these people were saying and suggested he let his superiors know.

General Park immediately established law and order. It was martial law, of course. Police were again respected and obeyed. Demonstrations were not permitted. There was peace and quiet again. The Korean people had learned the lesson that anything is better than anarchy, and perhaps the students of 1987 who were not even born then should be reminded of this. Everyone relaxed. Conditions began to improve almost at once, although there was grumbling about new laws and regulations. For instance, one of the first orders was to forbid all tree cutting...this in a country where nearly everybody depended upon wood for cooking and heating, but where the hills were completely bare from years of over-cutting.

4. The fourth period was an extension of the third, when

General Park was shot to death in 1981 and after several months General Chun Do-whan took over. His greatest blunder was in the so-called Kwangju incident when a spontaneous insurrection in that southern city was put down with inexcusable brutality and terrible bloodshed. President Chun continued the same policies of his predecessor. My own feeling is that he attempted to ease conditions, such as removing martial law and allowing more freedom of expression and open political opposition movements. This not only did not satisfy the voices of dissent, especially among the students, but rather (when the lid was lifted off the pot), things began to boil over with stepped up demonstrations about which we have seen much in the news this year with an escalation of violence and repressive methods by the government.

But the result after these four eras just described is that today the Korean people are living better than ever in history. Gone are the old mud-walled, straw-thatched huts...in their place are new, better constructed, more convenient modern-style homes...not only in the cities but in much of the rural countryside. I could find no place anywhere (even on the islands) where there was no electricity. Country villages are being supplied with running water. Color TV, refrigerators, and other appliances are normal in city dwelling and very common on farms. Automatic direct dialing phones bring instant communications with remote mountain villages and the islands of the sea. Four-lane paved expressways lace the land, with heavy traffic of private automobiles, trucks of all kinds, and one of the most efficient bus systems in the world. Beggars are not seen, everyone is well-fed and well-dressed, and physically healthy in appearance...including the little children. The percentage of people attending university is said to be higher than that of Great Britain. Business thrives, tremendous industries turn out automobiles, super-oiltankers, electronic goods, textiles...everything. There is virtually no unemployment except perhaps among university graduates who have educated themselves above what positions are available.

There is no question but that this has been done at the expense of some freedoms and human rights. At least until very recently, it was dangerous to criticize the government even in whispers. Even now one has to be careful, particularly in print. It is true that some, particularly in Seoul have been arrested, mistreated, and even tortured, as you have heard from John Somerville who has been personally involved with many of those who have been victims. Some of the latter may have been communist agents or law-breakers of some kind (as claimed by the government), but undoubtedly most of them suffered for the cause of freedom and democracy. We do not condone any of this, and, of course, should use every way possible to bring about a change. Yet actually only an infinitesimal small part of the population have been involved in the severe forms of repression. For me, at least, we should also look at the larger picture from the

perspective of the sufferings of these people for a century. Where would Koreans be today if they had tottered along with the kind of regime (a so-called Democracy) they had under President Rhee? What chaos (or perhaps communist take-over) would have resulted from continued anarchy? None of us Americans like a military dictatorship, but we have to realize that in much of the world today that is still the pattern, and that as dictatorships go, Korea has had a fairly good one in terms of the general progress of the country. Even within the framework of a dictatorship, her citizens enjoy personal freedoms unknown in some other lands (North Korea, for instance)...<sup>such as</sup> travel, education, religion, etc. A few Christian pastors have been arrested, mistreated, and jailed...not for their faith, but because of anti-government agitation, exactly as is the case of non-Christian activists.

In one major area, the one with which I am most familiar and the one generally overlooked in discussions of the human rights situation in Korea, there has been revolutionary progress. I refer to rural areas. When we reached Korea, the average farmer was desperately poor, did not own his own land, was perpetually in debt, and had no hope for any future improvement. Almost at once, the military government enforced laws already on the books but seldom observed, which put ownership of land in the hands of those who live and work thereon...while absentee owners were suitably reimbursed. Co-ops for providing farm credits, seed, fertilizer, machinery, and the marketing of crops were established everywhere. Interest rates of some 6% per month were reduced by an interesting process which is another story, so that today they are not too different from ours in the US. Now the average farmer owns his own land, lives in a far more comfortable home, uses machinery to transplant and harvest his rice crop, and is fat and flourishing. Was this not a significant advance in human rights...when some 20 million people who had been slaves to an unjust and oppressive system can now live in dignity and prosperity? It took a strong government to awaken Korea from age-old lethargy, to enforce unpopular regulations, bull-doze through land-owners' reluctance to yield right-of-way for expressways, and accept the temporary sacrifices and disciplines required to establish modern industries.

As a missionary whose life-time has been <sup>spent in</sup> church planting and development in rural areas, I am proud of the achievements of the Christian movement in just over a century. All of you have heard of the remarkable growth of the Church of Korea. Perhaps more than any other single force, the Christian movement has brought about changes for good in Korea...not only in the spiritual sense of the Gospel of salvation in the name of Jesus Christ which some one-fifth to one-fourth of the population has adopted, but also in solid contributions on every level to human rights and to democracy in government. Let me list just a few:



1. Modern education was almost entirely introduced by early missionaries.

2. The position of women has been improved many times over due to Christian influence...beginning with the first schools for girls and continuing to give them dignity and freedom of expression in their homes, society, businesses, and churches.

3. All kinds of charity were inspired by Christianity. Modern hospitals and health care, orphanages, work with the blind, deaf, lepers, etc...missionaries and now the Korean Church itself deserves credit for initiating and promoting all of this.

4. The processes of self-government which was a novel idea in Korea a century ago, came from contact with Christianity, especially Presbyterianism...for Korea is a Presbyterian country. Here they learned how to elect officers, how to hold congregational meetings, and organize church courts. They learned how to make motions and second or amend them, they learned about constitutions...and all the rest of it. Little wonder that an outstanding number of government leaders at the first and even today are Christians or have been strongly influenced by church life...including the two current opposition leaders.

With this background of material, I hope you will understand that I have a somewhat different outlook on Korea than does my good friend John Somerville. He tends to be extremely pessimistic, while I am hopefully optimistic. I see things as a gradual improvement toward the goals we both want to see fulfilled. After all, we Americans share the common error of assuming that the American way is better than any other way, and we American Christians often fail to see that the Christians of other lands do not necessarily have to do things exactly as we do here. We may not seek to impose our wills upon the peoples of other lands by military force, but we are often guilty of what has been called "cultural imperialism." In our criticism of what goes on in Korea, let us not assume that they must accept instantly our standards of human rights and democracy, as desirable as that might be from our viewpoint. After all, our own record is not all that good. The thirteen colonies took quite a time to heal their divisions, hammer out our system of government, and amend the constitution to the form it has today. It took nearly a hundred years to abolish the institution of slavery...a terrible infringement of human rights. How many slaves were cruelly mistreated? They were regarded as property rather than as human beings...and even yet we are striving to erase the prejudices and discriminations stemming from that dark chapter of our history. Our country has had centuries of influence by the Christian ethic, and a long history of development in the cherished freedoms and systems of democratic government. On the other hand, Korea (and the rest of Asia) have millennia of quite different traditions...based on the Confucian system which

may sometimes seem stronger than the bulls, but overall it is getting better. The Korean people are no longer isolated. They are constantly exposed to the ideals they see expressed in American style democracy, and in the Christian Church. Most of them are many times better informed about what goes on in the United States (their role model)...especially in the political world...than most Americans are about all the rest of the world put together. These things are bound to have an effect. The Korean students and other dissenters may be impatient, and the government may drag its feet, but the Koreans have a great way of miraculously creating order out of chaos (and vice-versa). Like all Orientals, they consider "saving face" all important. They are not about to lose face before a world astonished at her economic and industrial miracles...or at her ability to put on the 1988 World Olympics. I predict that whether peacefully or violently, Korea will pull herself together just in time for the Olympics, that positive steps toward democracy and improvements in human rights will be taken...and a new era will begin (though many of the old faults will still persist for some time to come.) Given the traditions, the tragedies, and the tribulations of her past along with the awakening consciences and as yet immature concepts of democracy of the present...but without condoning some deplorable aspects of her government policies...is it not time to at least be understanding of these remarkable and valiant people while we continue to hope and pray and work that the future will be better than all they have endured before?

The last thing I have to say is this: If I were Mr. Average Korean in 1987, I would be far, far, far happier to live in my homeland today, than in any past ~~era~~ of the 4000 year history of my land.

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