

24 11/79 *

[Redacted]

APPROVED FOR RELEASE
DATE: AUG 2002

South Korea: A Political Assessment

[Redacted]

(b)(1)
(b)(3)
(S)

President Pak Chong-hui, now in his 18th year as South Korea's national leader, has enjoyed considerable success in establishing political stability, a strong national defense, and economic and social modernization. Pak has retained his longstanding bases of support in the military and the bureaucracy, and in the 1970s he has strengthened his equities with the rural population and with a significant part of South Korea's growing urban middle class. The "Saemaul Movement"--a multifaceted government program that promotes both economic development and grass-roots political participation--has been an especially useful mechanism in strengthening support in the countryside. The emerging urban middle class in Korea, fostered by a decade of rapid economic growth, has a growing stake in the political and economic status quo.

Nonetheless, Pak has his problems.

[Redacted]

But the country's democratic and representative institutions--the national legislature, the political parties, and the press--have little independence and are not widely respected. Their weaknesses could become significant if and when, for whatever reason, power should be transferred to a new leader, something that has never happened without considerable turmoil in South Korea.

Short of a succession crisis, other developments could spell trouble for President Pak. Maintaining strong economic growth almost certainly is one of the ingredients required to head off political unrest in South Korea's expanding urban areas. Economic progress remains largely dependent on the continued expansion of exports, which, in turn, will require Seoul to shift to higher technology industries in the years ahead. South

Korea probably can make the transition, but it still faces international competition, increasing energy and raw material costs, and a high degree of dependence on overseas market conditions.

The dissidents are a small, if vocal, minority; they are badly divided among themselves; and they have been unable to articulate goals with broad appeal.

This situation may be changing. Some church groups have become more militant in their approach toward organizing labor. The major opposition political party now has as its leader a more aggressive critic of the Pak government. South Korea's recent economic woes have provided a rallying point.

These elements came together dramatically in August when a group of women workers who had lost their jobs staged a sit-in at the opposition party headquarters in Seoul with the assistance of some church activities. In evicting the workers during an early morning raid, Pak's security forces used excessive force. The government has turned aside dissident demands for punishment of the police officials in charge

[REDACTED]

But the sit-in itself reflects economic and social trends that could lead to broader unrest if left unattended.

[REDACTED]