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# **South Korea: Politics Under Chun Doo Hwan**

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

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September 1981*

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# South Korea: Politics Under Chun Doo Hwan

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**An Intelligence Assessment**

*Information available as of 15 August 1981  
has been used in the preparation of this report.*

This assessment was prepared by [redacted]  
[redacted] Office of Political Analysis. Comments  
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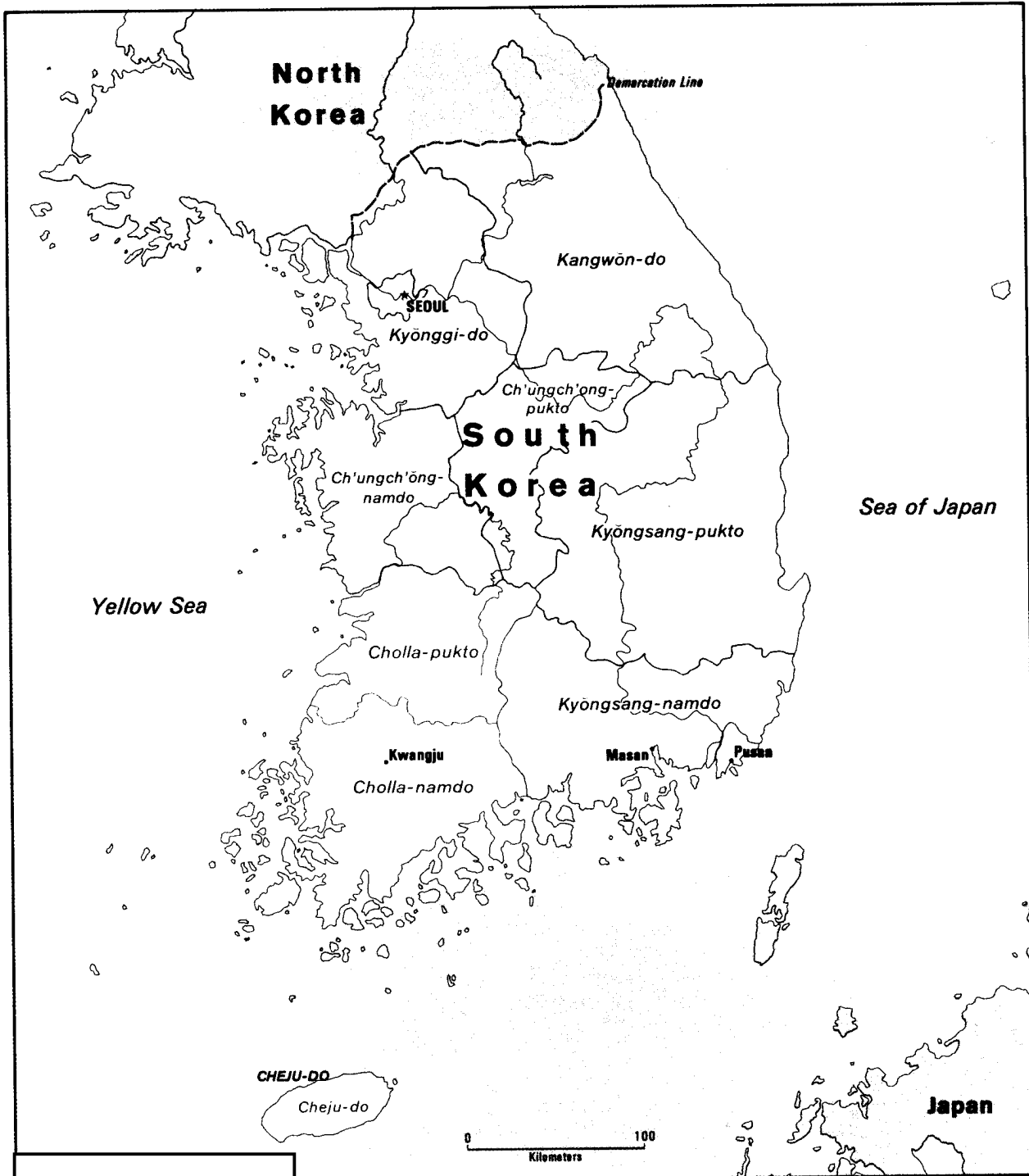
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**Key Judgments**

South Korea has entered a period of relative political stability after a year and a half of uncertainty following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee. The next year or two will be marked with sporadic antigovernment incidents by disgruntled elements, but—barring any government misstep—this should pose no serious challenge to Chun Doo Hwan's regime.

Chun has consolidated his support within the military and recognizes that his support rests on his successful handling of the nation's problems and remaining responsive to the needs of national security and of the military. His Democratic Justice Party has gained a solid majority in the National Assembly and will provide a strong base for his political programs. The National Assembly probably will not be the rubberstamp that Chun would like it to be, but at least it will not soon become the forum for antigovernment confrontation that it was in the past. The docile, controlled mass media and a strong popular yearning for stability—even at the expense of a liberal democratic system—will help Chun maintain a tight control over the political process. The political system is likely to remain substantially the same over the next several years. Politics will be basically authoritarian, with numerous restrictions on the opposition. Chun will ease his stringent controls only gradually. He will do so only if he gains politically and if the opposition does not perceive relaxation as a sign of weakness.

The rest of 1981 and the first half of 1982 promise to be relatively calm. Student demonstrations can be expected both this fall and next spring, but they will be dealt with quickly and forcefully. Succeeding years will be characterized by a resurgence in demands for democracy and a gradual revival of partisan wrangling in parliament.


Chun's success in office will hinge mainly on his ability to reduce inflation and unemployment and revive business confidence in his government. Recent economic indicators have been encouraging. The resurgence of exports has paved the way for 6-percent real growth in GNP this year, and slightly higher rates are attainable in subsequent years. Continued improvement in the economy will boost Chun's stock; a deterioration of the economy would almost certainly lead to a weakening of his popular support.

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Chun's attitude toward human rights is likely to influence ties with the United States, in view of the close links between Korean religious and human rights groups and sympathetic constituencies in the United States. In managing this and other issues, Chun will use "parliamentary diplomacy"—but will avoid the excesses of the Tongsun Park era—and will woo the large Korean emigre population in the United States to lobby for Korean interests and to enhance his regime's image.

Chun will seek Washington's continued assistance in strengthening Seoul's diplomatic hand against P'yongyang and in starting a dialogue with China and the Soviet Union. He also is likely to ask the United States to press Japan to recognize South Korea's importance for Japanese defense and to increase economic assistance to South Korea as a quid pro quo for its role in regional defense.

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What Chun Doo Hwan calls the "New Era" probably, in the end, will differ little in either substance or technique from the old "yusin" (revitalizing) system of President Park. Chun's rule is highly authoritarian and restrictive. Chun—like Park—has suppressed political liberties, tightly controlling criticism of himself and his government. Although Chun's regime is more repressive than that of Park, he is likely to ease present restrictions somewhat as he expands his base of support and as the economy improves.

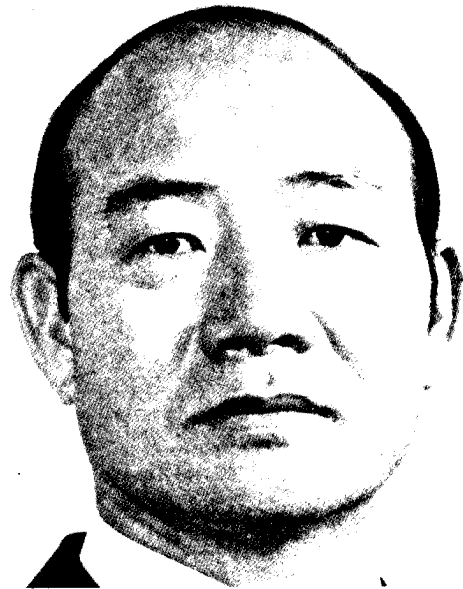
Politics in the New Era will reflect Chun's personal and flamboyant style of leadership. Chun has impressed many Korean and American observers with his leadership qualities: ambition and drive, boldness in action, and the ability to learn quickly.

Chun, moreover, does not tolerate criticism, especially from political opponents, and he demands absolute loyalty and obedience from his subordinates; these attributes could detract from his effectiveness.

**Governing Bodies**

Policy formulation and decisionmaking are highly centralized in the *Blue House staff*. Although outsiders are solicited for opinions, the initiative for most major policies comes from Chun and his young, retired military advisers, particularly Ho Hwa-pyong, Ho Sam-su, and Yi Hak-pong, men to whom Chun has delegated great authority.

The performance of the Blue House staff has been mixed so far. A number of poorly-thought-out measures have cost the regime good will. For example, in hope of diverting student attention on the first anniversary of the Kwangju insurrection, the government held a youth festival in Seoul, which only aroused student hostility and led to new demonstrations. Chun's able but inexperienced advisers have been criticized by both military and civilian officials for



President Chun Doo Hwan.

meddling in economic matters where they lack expertise. Moreover, some personal frictions among the Blue House staff and between them and the Army's leaders appear to be developing. Because Chun trusts and is dependent on his ex-military advisers, he will be reluctant to replace even the less able ones unless they become serious political liabilities.

One of Chun's concerns will be to avoid becoming isolated and manipulated by his advisers, as were Syngman Rhee and Park Chung Hee. Chun is well aware of the problem and has taken special pains to prevent it; he meets large numbers of visitors each day

Nonetheless, the danger exists, and the problem may become more difficult to manage over time.

*The National Assembly* probably will not be the rubberstamp that Chun would like, but neither will it soon become the forum for the kind of rough-and-tumble antigovernment confrontation that it was in

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the past. By promoting a multiparty system, Chun has succeeded in fragmenting the opposition and in making it difficult to challenge the government effectively. Some of the minor parties will attempt to merge to improve their bargaining position in the parliament, and many independents are likely to join a party or to align themselves with one. Strong factional rivalries, however, will remain, and because the most popular opposition politicians were either banned from political activity or prevented from running for office, the opposition parties are unlikely to produce a popular figure with enough charisma to become an effective spokesman for the antigovernment forces.

Chun would prefer to have the National Assembly project an image of harmony, but he probably will countenance a feisty opposition as long as it does not become strident. Chun will attempt to control the lawmakers through a combination of blandishments and political pressure.

So far, he has attempted to win over opposition lawmakers by consulting with them and making them feel more a part of the political system—something Park failed to do. For their part, the opposition leaders have done much posturing but have not attacked the government with the vehemence that characterized earlier National Assemblies.

The dissatisfaction of many younger opposition politicians with the cozy relationship between their leaders and the government is almost certain to increase. The spirit of independence among these younger leaders is likely to show itself within the next year in attempts to revise some of the laws passed during the transition period by the junta-like special legislative committee. Chun would oppose such efforts, which he views as undoing his reforms and likely to stimulate opposition from other social groups.

Chun's widespread purges and the forced retirements of Park-era officials in the name of generational change, which have helped consolidate his grip on power, also demoralized some parts of *the bureaucracy*, making it less efficient. There is at present a reluctance to make decisions—or even to exchange views freely—for fear of criticism. This is true even at the Cabinet level;

Even though Chun has formally given more leeway to his Cabinet than Park, government officials appear reluctant to be innovative and wait for the Blue House to guide them.

The purges and some lingering doubts about Chun's political durability encourage corruption that could lead to a loss of public confidence in the government. Many officials, including Chun's political appointees, expect to lose their jobs one way or another, and the temptation to use their positions to accumulate personal wealth is strong. Chun must stabilize and reassure the bureaucracy if it is to administer his programs effectively.

#### **Strengthening the Underpinnings of Power**

Chun's prospects for getting through the next few years without serious trouble are good and are enhanced by a gradually widening base of support—or at least tolerance.

First, Chun has gained the reluctant acceptance of the *general public*. Many working-class Koreans attribute the long economic recession to the loss of strong leadership after the assassination of Park and seem willing to give Chun a chance. So far, the public has not been willing to support attempts by students and other dissident groups to foment unrest. Chun, moreover, continues to make skillful use of the media to portray an image of himself as an internationally respected leader, a patriot, and the only person capable of coping with the country's political and economic problems. Chun will continue to stress his efforts to deal with the North Korean threat, in part by pursuing a dialogue with P'yongyang.

Chun is also reaping political benefits from his pledge to clean up corruption in government. He has already removed a high-ranking military officer and had one of his own relatives investigated for influence peddling. In addition to enhancing his own image, this kind of purge also is an effective tool for controlling the political opposition and for removing potential rivals. The anticorruption campaign is likely to continue to be one of the main themes of Chun's administration, although, as noted earlier, it could prove counterproductive to the goal of stabilizing the bureaucracy.

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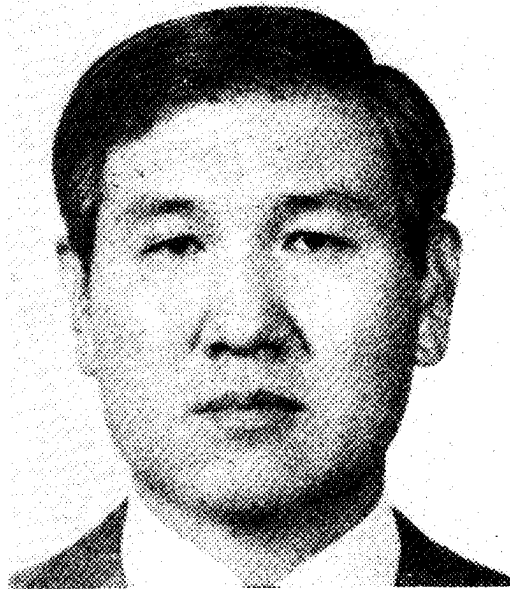
Second, Chun already has consolidated his power base in the *military*, with his friends and supporters occupying key commands. A substantial body of military opinion is opposed to further Army involvement in civilian politics, and most senior officers realize that any attempt to unseat Chun would damage the economy and weaken national security. In the absence of a serious loss of confidence in Chun, the military is unlikely to oust him.

By arranging the retirement in July of General No Tae Woo, Chun's Korean Military Academy classmate and a key member of the "core group" that helped him seize control of the armed forces in December 1979, Chun removed from the military the man most able to move against him. Chun probably will retain his military support as long as he is successful in handling the broader national problems—the economy, national security, and political stability—as well as narrower military concerns, such as a just system of promotions and assignments, attractive pay levels, and the maintenance of the military's social prestige.

Third, Chun also is building a civilian power base; his newly created *Democratic Justice Party (DJP)* gained a solid victory in the National Assembly elections in March. By winning 90 of 92 constituencies and 61 proportional representation seats—well over half of the total of 276 seats—the DJP has secured a comfortable majority in the legislature. Chun claims that he wants to make the DJP into a disciplined, ideologically dedicated, and effective party that will survive his presidency and act as a counterforce to the Korean Workers (Communist) Party in North Korea. Despite the DJP's assertions that it will become an independent political force, it is more likely to assume the same role as Park's Democratic Republican Party—an extension of the President and an instrument for carrying out his policies.

#### **Outlook for Chun's Opposition**

To maintain stability, Chun must contend with a number of hostile elements—especially student radicals and Christian dissidents—who have been further alienated by his consolidation of power. These groups



Korea Herald

Retired General No Tae Woo. [REDACTED]

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deny Chun's legitimacy, viewing him as a usurper who has derailed progress toward a truly democratic political system. They are particularly embittered by the bloody suppression of the Kwangju insurrection last year. Adding to the frustration of these groups is their perception that the United States abetted Chun's takeover and that it is unlikely to intervene to force Chun to liberalize the system. Although they realize that there is nothing they can do to remove him, some nonetheless feel compelled to demonstrate their opposition.

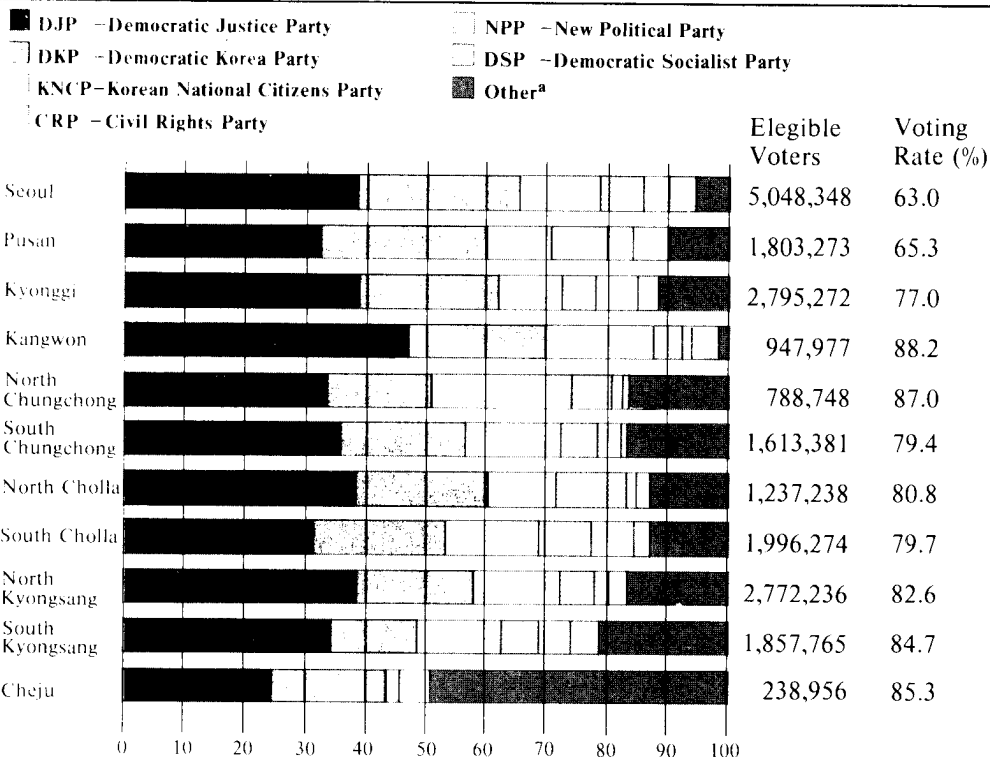
A small number of radical *college students* continue to call for Chun's ouster. They attempted to foment demonstrations during the spring semester, but effective government tactics and general student apathy militated against serious incidents. The new prominence of leftist slogans and issues in student propaganda—including the use of some anti-US themes—concerns the authorities, as does the perception that youth in general is growing less hostile toward North Korea.

Improved planning and the formation of a reported underground movement will allow radical student leaders to coordinate better their antigovernment activi-

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**South Korea: Voting Statistics for the 11th National Assembly Election by Province**

Percent of Vote



<sup>a</sup>Other includes Democratic Farmers Party, Human Welfare Party, and Independents.

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ties this fall and next spring. They will seize on issues of opportunity to foment antigovernment activities, but they are still unlikely to attract significant student support. Although the government may remove police from the campuses in the fall, the security services will continue to act quickly and decisively to quell any campus turmoil.

**Christian dissident groups**, now dormant, will almost certainly become more strident in their political demands within the next few years. While Chun has

undercut some of the most sensitive issues—by commuting Kim Dae Jung's death sentence, granting clemency for many Kwangju offenders, and releasing numerous political offenders—some human rights activists are pressuring Christian leaders to take a more aggressive stance.

To lessen this kind of pressure, Chun will periodically release more political prisoners, perhaps including Kim Dae Jung himself, who probably would be permitted to go into exile. Nonetheless, Christian

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groups probably will gradually take up politically sensitive issues, press for an easing of the restrictions on prayer meetings and other political gatherings, and protest against alleged police brutality and torture of political prisoners. Chun will attempt to control religious dissidence without infringing on religious liberties, but will do so if necessary to curb dissent.

Reverend Sung Myung Moon's controversial Unification Church has the potential for becoming a political issue, because it is attempting to enlarge its control over nondenominational Christian churches. This has aroused the anger of moderate Protestant clergymen, who see the Unification Church as a tool of the government. Although Chun probably would like to take advantage of what many perceive as the church's anti-Communist orientation and its influence in Washington, he is aware of the political risks and will keep his distance.

In addition, several other interest groups will require careful management by the government:

- The traditionally antigovernment South Korean *press* has been effectively neutralized by the restrictive Basic Press Law, but it will carefully test the limits of permissible dissent. The authorities will move quickly to punish those who exceed these limits, and there is little prospect of independent printed and broadcast journalism in the foreseeable future.
- *The victims of Chun's political and bureaucratic purges* clearly harbor resentment toward the regime. Although few in number, they are politically astute. They are unlikely by themselves to spark the kind of activity that could lead to serious problems for the regime, but they could be troublesome in combination with other groups.
- The deepest, most bitter opposition to Chun is among the *residents of South Cholla Province*; dealing with their hostility will be a continuous headache for Chun. The government is attempting to heal the wounds of last year's insurrection primarily through increased economic assistance. Another Kwangju incident is unlikely, but students from Cholla will continue to agitate against Chun

on campuses throughout the country. The people of Kwangju will remain hostile to Chun, as well as the United States for its perceived complicity in the Chun takeover and the Kwangju incident.

Paradoxically, to the extent that Chun is able to create stability and prosperity, he will obviate the need for a highly centralized, authoritarian regime, thus providing a more fertile climate for liberalization demands. The more successful Chun is, therefore, the more likely there will be increasing demands for democracy, a gradual revival of partisan wrangling in the parliament, and, barring a change in P'yongyang's present policy, a diminution of the perception of the North Korean threat—especially among the younger generation—which has served as a check on dissent. Chun probably will run a tighter ship than did Park; he will "liberalize" in response to popular demands only gradually, only if there is political gain in it for him, and only if the process can be handled in such a way that the opposition would not regard it as a sign of weakness.

#### **The Economic Dimension**

The public expects Chun to solve the country's economic woes. The fate of the economy will thus be a key factor in Chun's ability to maintain popular confidence in his leadership. He must drastically reduce last year's 30-percent inflation rate, cut unemployment, and—perhaps most important—convince the populace there has been improvement.<sup>1</sup>

The economy itself is sound but highly vulnerable to and dependent on world economic conditions. Although Seoul's economic planning officials are highly capable civilian experts, they are sometimes subjected to policy pressures from the ex-military advisers in the Blue House. Military interference in economic matters last year contributed to a loss of business initiative and to inertia among both businessmen and the government bureaucracy. Many Korean businessmen still are suspicious of the Chun government, uncertain about its future policies, and fearful of more anticorruption purges. So far, the government has refrained from prosecuting businessmen for fear of further depressing their entrepreneurial impulses.

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Foreign loans to South Korea—on substantially improved terms—have increased with the restoration of political and economic stability. Many foreign companies, however, are backing away from equity ventures, in part because of high labor costs and the failure of the South Korean bureaucracy actively to promote foreign investment. Nonetheless, barring serious external shocks such as sharp oil hikes, downturns in import demands among Western industrialized states, or serious government missteps on economic policy, the economy should register 6-percent growth this year and 7 to 8 percent annually for the next five years.

Although the economy has begun to recover, inflation is still high and low income groups are finding it increasingly hard to cope. Until the average Korean feels improvement in the economic situation, the Chun regime will face a potential threat of labor unrest. Unions are weak and disorganized, seemingly acquiescing to government measures that have reduced their influence. Many workers are unhappy over government guidelines limiting wage increases and over the inability of some employers to meet payrolls. To help control inflation and to make South Korean industry competitive internationally, workers have generally agreed to smaller wage increases in expectation of larger hikes when the economy improves. Meanwhile, the government has averted serious labor disputes through the use of labor-management councils and government arbitration.

Workers may be less willing to make sacrifices next year when the economy is moving forward, and they may become more politically active if the government is not more sympathetic to their needs. An unexpected downturn in the economy would pose even greater problems. In particular, the authorities worry that disgruntled workers might ally themselves with radical students. In Pusan and Masan in October 1979, large numbers of disaffected workers joined student demonstrations against the government, turning them into riots that led to the imposition of martial law in those areas.

#### **Succession Questions**

The question of succession will remain an important latent issue throughout Chun's presidential term. Chun repeatedly has promised to step down after his

seven-year term and to turn over power peacefully. In South Korea, where political power has never yet changed hands in this way, such a move would make Chun a great patriot—a prospect that would have strong appeal for him.

Many Koreans, however, doubt that Chun will step down voluntarily. They see him as following the path of Syngman Rhee in 1954 and Park Chung Hee in 1972, when they swept aside constitutionally mandated procedures and stayed in office. Students and intellectuals especially distrust Chun's intentions, but the general public—and some in the military—also would bitterly oppose any move by Chun to prolong his rule. While Chun may be sincere in his promise to step down in seven years, he will be under great pressure from many of his supporters to remain in power.

#### **The American Connection**

Chun's domestic policy will focus on social reforms, anticorruption drives, the management of dissent, economic growth, and personal image building. Chun will be watching to see how his policies are assessed in Washington, since careful handling of internal political and economic issues will smooth his relations with the United States, and warm relations with Washington in turn will strengthen further his political position at home.

In particular, Chun's handling of the problem of human rights over the next few years is likely to have a great impact on ties with the United States, given the close ties between Korean religious and human rights groups and sympathetic constituencies in the United States. In managing this and other issues, Chun will use "parliamentary diplomacy"—but will avoid the excesses of the Tongsun Park era—and will woo the large Korean emigre population in the United States to lobby for Korean interests and to enhance his regime's image.

Some minor problems in the area of US military support levels, sales of US-licensed arms to third countries, and trade quotas for South Korean products are almost certain to crop up in the next several years, but they should not disturb the alliance or create major domestic political problems for Chun.

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Chun believes that the United States places a high value on its alliance with South Korea and the role of South Korea in Northeast Asian regional defense. He will, therefore, seek Washington's continued assistance in strengthening South Korea's diplomatic hand against North Korea, in blunting P'yongyang's diplomatic offensives, and in undercutting Kim Il-song's unification proposals. He will ask Washington not to expand its economic or political contacts with P'yongyang and will continue to seek US support and assistance for South Korean efforts to start a dialogue with China and the Soviet Union—P'yongyang's principal backers. Finally, Chun is likely to ask the United States to use its influence to press Tokyo to recognize South Korea's contribution to Japan's defenses and to increase economic assistance as a quid pro quo for Seoul's role in regional defense.



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