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MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: South Korea: Pak and the Students

Summary

Small-scale demonstrations at one of Seoul's major universities in early October revealed a degree of organization among a hard core of activists and a general level of student unrest not evident for two years. Swift but moderate government action prevented the immediate situation from getting out of hand. But many students remain strongly opposed to the regime's repressive policies; expression of their resentment could be stimulated by recent events in Thailand or heavy-handed action by the regime, such as the recent "suicide" death of a university professor while under government interrogation. The possibility of any major student challenge to the Pak regime is reduced, however, by the regime's experience in dealing with campus unrest and the reluctance of the general population--whose support would be necessary to bring the government down--to risk the economic, political, and security disruptions that would flow from a major student rebellion.

The increasing authoritarian character of the Pak government will continue to feed campus unrest. The government's handling of the current student situation has, however, demonstrated Pak's continued ability to meet such difficulties with measured force. As long as he exercises restraint, the student problem is not likely to evolve into a direct threat to the security of his government.

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Student Unrest

Unlike students in Thailand, students in Korea have been highly politicized for generations. They were in the forefront of the challenge to Japanese colonial rule and played the key role in the downfall of the Rhee government in 1960. But the students are hampered by the same endemic factionalism that characterizes all Korean political life. Lack of a national organization, coupled with parochial school loyalties, tends to localize their impact on all but major issues. All modern Korean governments have respected their potential, however

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The primary effect of student activism in recent years has been to provide the regime with useful experience in manipulating and controlling campus dissension--experience that the recently deposed Thai leadership utterly lacked. Student efforts to frustrate the 1964-65 normalization of relations with Japan were firmly suppressed, and attempts in 1969 to block the constitutional amendment permitting Pak to run for a third term were unsuccessful. Student efforts on behalf of New Democratic Party chief Kim Tae-chung, Pak's opponent in the 1971 presidential election, were equally ineffective. Through a series of campus riots--ostensibly focused on campus military training--the students attempted without success to force the government into heavy-handed action which would have discredited the Pak regime and helped the opposition.

But Pak's victory over Kim Tae-chung was so marginal that the President was convinced that the relatively free political atmosphere he had allowed was threatening his control. In the summer of 1971, in concert with the opening of the dialogue with the North, Pak set in motion a wide range of authoritarian measures and reforms which culminated in the martial law decree and constitutional revision of late 1972.



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A resumption of student protests over military training in October 1971 strengthened the President's determination to tighten his grip. After failing to quell the demonstrators through a show of force, Pak closed the universities, arrested or drafted student leaders, and outlawed student publications and organizations. The regime's swift and harsh action broke the back of organized student protest. The lack of any off-campus student demonstrations during the following academic year--the first such hiatus since 1948--attested to the effectiveness of the government's clampdown.

Aside from simple fear, student quiescence in 1972 can be explained in part by the President's successful promotion of his new domestic programs. Most students, like South Koreans in general, were initially willing to accept martial law as the price for meaningful and successful reform and an end to corruption. This willingness to give Pak the benefit of the doubt quickly vanished, however, in the face of the government's heavy-handed intimidation and manipulation of student leaders and professors. The increasing role of the South Korean CIA in stifling all forms of political dissent, a phenomenon recently and dramatically reflected by the CIA's abduction of Kim Tae-chung, also fed student discontent. By early 1973 a new racial student group--the Black October Movement--had been organized, and some student activists were supporting a movement of Christian ministers protesting the regime's repressive activities.

Last Month's Trouble

Overt campus opposition has been limited to two relatively small student demonstrations during the first week in October sparked by the opening of court proceedings against a group of students and

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professors arrested earlier. The larger demonstration involved about 300 students at Seoul National University. The government's response reflected its experience and confidence in dealing with student dissent: the demonstration was allowed to continue for several hours before being broken up by police; students were confined to campus; the demonstrators were isolated from the bulk of the student body; and most of the activist leaders were arrested without resort to violence. Then the government pressed university officials to tighten campus control. This quick but carefully modulated action rapidly brought the situation under control. Although the level of student unrest and resentment remains high, overt protest activity is at present limited to a minor boycott of classes at various Seoul campuses. The students have so far failed to respond with any vigor to the alleged "suicide" last month of a Seoul National University professor under government detention. In spite of widespread speculation that the professor died as a result of torture by the CIA.

The Government's Reactions

The regime has reacted with surprise and consternation to this latest sign of student independence and opposition. The government received no advance warning of the October demonstrations, an alarming failure for a regime so heavily dependent on its intelligence service to monitor and control students. But the regime's reaction to these unwelcome developments, on balance, has been encouraging.

Since early October Pak has consulted frequently with his chief advisers on the matter, in itself a sign of the President's healthy respect for the potential threat posed by student dissent. Pak has moved quickly to avoid a confrontation. In recent weeks, he has quietly arranged for the release of many of the students arrested and the reinstatement of those expelled. The regime has also publicly pledged to take a conciliatory approach to the students--a move obviously designed to prevent the development of popular sympathy for the students. Although the recent and well-publicized release of Kim

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Tae-chung from house arrest was prompted by the need to reach a speedy resolution of the affair with Tokyo, Kim's freedom has also conveniently served as a peace offering to the students.

At the same time, Pak has been careful to avoid giving the impression that the students have somehow come out on top. The principal student agitators remain in jail and the regime is offering no excuses for the alleged suicide of the Seoul National University professor. Pak has increased the police forces assigned to quelling student disorders and has made it clear that he will respond forcefully to any further trouble this academic year.

With winter vacations beginning soon on Seoul's campuses, the government appears to have weathered the immediate storm. The longer term prognosis for student unrest in South Korea is somewhat less certain. Is a massive and successful student uprising such as that which occurred recently in Bangkok or during the collapse of the Syngman Rhee regime in 1960 possible? The initial answer must be a cautious yes. At least two key ingredients are present: a government increasingly intolerant of any domestic opposition and a student "movement" with a long history of activism and political involvement. The regime's authoritarian bent for action will almost certainly continue to provide issues open to student exploitation, and campus unrest will probably remain the most significant potential source of political and social instability in South Korea.

In seeking to control South Korea's students, however, Pak can operate from a much stronger position than either the recently deposed Thai leadership or the former Syngman Rhee government. Unlike Rhee, Pak has firm control over the military and police forces in the country, and his subordinates are capable, vigorous, and loyal. Pak has long recognized that control of the military is the key to his survival and has aggressively cultivated a fiercely loyal and a political military force. The President has successfully prevented any of his key

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civilian or military subordinates from developing sufficient support or stature to rival his own position. Unlike the case in Thailand, there is no General Krit in the military with authority to act independently or to develop an independent base of power and no sympathetic bureaucracy and king eager to support a student challenge.

The nation's flourishing economy and security are also in Pak's favor. Korea is still riding the crest of an economic boom and the regime's imaginative policies may well extend the period of rapid economic growth to the end of the decade. The negotiations with North Korea have provided an element of security which has not existed in the lifetime of many Koreans. The regime constantly reminds the nation of this and the fact that the strength and stability of the regime deters North Korean aggression. There is no indication that significant numbers of the South Korean people would be willing to risk losing this strength and stability by encouraging or supporting student rebellion.

Finally, the authoritarian character of the Pak government is itself a strong factor in its perpetuation. The majority of Korean people respect strong leadership, and there is no comparable alternative in sight to Pak's leadership. To be sure, its repressive aspects could nurture the dissent the regime is trying to eliminate. But the main lesson of the recent student demonstrations is that Pak is still capable of tempering his tough policies with timely moderation. As long as he exercises restraint, the chances of a serious student challenge to his regime will be greatly reduced.

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