South Koreans win mass campaign for democracy, 1986-87

Time period notes: Although groups had begun to agitate for democracy and form more opposition groups in the years leading up to 1986, the direct action campaign seemed to begin in early 1986 with NKDP’s signature drive and statements by religious groups.

January 1986 to June 1987

Country: South Korea

Goals:
To get a revision of the constitution that would safeguard human rights and democracy. In particular this included direct elections.

To open political space for democracy, economic justice, civil society

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 004. Signed public statements
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 004. Signed public statements
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

• 001. Public speeches
• 003. Declarations by organizations and institutions
• 038. Marches
• 039. Parades
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 016. Picketing
• 020. Prayer and worship
• 037. Singing
• 048. Protest meetings
• 122. Literature and speeches advocating resistance

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights
Group characterization:

• labor
• landless peasants
• leading intellectuals
• most of the Buddhist and Protestant and Roman Catholic clergy plus lay groupings from those religious traditions
• students
• teachers and professors
Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
People's Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (PMCDR)

Partners:
New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP)

External allies:
Middle class elements

Involvement of social elites:
Cardinal Sin (Roman Catholic)

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
- Religious leaders and lay people

Groups in 2nd Segment:
- Laborers

Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
- Middle class citizens

Groups in 6th Segment:
- National Movement Headquarters for Democratic Constitution
- actors
- artists
- novelists
- writers

Segment Length: 3 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Ruling military regime under Chun Doo Hwan

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known

Campaigner violence:
Some fighting with police in the course of street demonstrations

Repressive Violence:
Numerous arrests, beatings, tear gas attacks, torture (including to death in one case)
Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
5 points out of 6 points
Survival:
1 point out of 1 points
Growth:
3 points out of 3 points
Notes on outcomes:
Not 6 for goals because it is not clear whether the constitution itself was revised, although structural changes of a constitutional sort were made by the government (see narrative). Space for civil society opened up and direct elections were held.

The organizing groups survived the campaign.

The campaign grew to include middle class citizens, laborers, and all geographic areas of South Korea.

The massive South Korean nonviolent campaign against the tradition of authoritarian regimes happened only seven years after the notorious Kwangju Massacre of 1980—governmental mass violence that was intended to shut down completely the movements for social justice.

From 1980 to 1983 the government tried to “cleanse” the society of activists, purging or arresting thousands of public officials, politicians, professors, teachers, pastors, journalists, and students. Activists not arrested went quiet or continued their activities in low profile or secretive ways.

The governmental repression generated such hostility in the general public that the current authoritarian president Chun Doo Hwan began to fear that his party would lose the next election. In late 1983 he therefore reversed his policy. For example, he allowed anti-government professors and students to return to their schools, withdrew military police from campuses, and pardoned political prisoners.

In 1984 a group of labor unions created a pro-democracy alliance, then students from 42 universities and colleges organized the National Student Coalition for Democracy Struggle.

Unions and students joined forces in 1985 to create a large umbrella coalition that included religious, farmers, teachers and other groups: the People’s Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (PMCDR).

In this more hopeful environment a new opposition political party formed to contest the next election, gaining support from many in the PMCDR as well as dissident politicians. This party, the New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP), emerged in 1985 as the major opposition in the National Assembly. After 2 years in exile leading dissident Kim Dae Jung flew back to Seoul to face possible arrest or death; he had protective accompaniment by two U.S. Congressional Representatives, among others. (See case “Nonviolent Intervention in S. Korea for Leading Dissident, 1985.”)

In 1986 religious activists including the Roman Catholic Cardinal issued statements chiding the government and demanding constitutional revision that would ensure human rights. Hundreds of professors issued statements of non-confidence in the regime. A variety of groups organized mass rallies for democratization.

The New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) initiated a mass drive to collect ten million signatures nationwide for a constitutional revision (10 million was almost half the entire electorate!). Police tried to crack down by raiding NKDP headquarters and offices of civil society groups, making many arrests. Signatures continued to pour in.
The growing movement was heartened by the People Power revolution in the Philippines that overthrew dictator Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986. Participation in the mass rallies went beyond the 700,000 mark, the highest since the “April Uprising” against dictator Syngman Rhee in 1960.

During the spring of 1986 students and workers held demonstrations calling for the removal of U.S. support for the military regime. In response to these demonstrations (one of which resulted in clashes between soldiers and protesters), the government began to arrest hundreds of people. In addition the government searched thousands of houses and closed down opposition offices.

Nonetheless, South Koreans supporting greater democracy continued demonstrations despite the governmental repression. When it was found that police had killed a student while torturing him in January 1987, nationwide demonstrations took on new momentum. In response to this killing, ordinary South Koreans joined the radical opposition in their protests against the current government.

On April 13, 1987, Chun Doo Hwan announced he would terminate public discussion of constitutional revision and pass power over to another military ruler without direct elections. This caused a major outcry: religious leaders and priests engaged in hunger strikes, artists, novelists, writers and actors publicly attacked the announcement, tens of thousands demonstrated in major cities.

Following this announcement, additional groups joined the existing forces to establish the National Movement Headquarters for Democratic Constitution (NMHDC), which now covered all major groups and geographical areas. Religious leaders continued to demand support the democracy campaign and students increased the numbers of demonstrations on their campuses. The NMHDC organized local branches throughout the country and when June came NMHDC organized a series of massive pro-democracy demonstrations.

On June 9 a student was hit by tear gas bomb fragments and fatally injured, and the next day the NMHDC organized the “Uprising Rally to Defeat the April 13 Decision and to End Dictatorship.” That provided a springboard for a June 26 “Peace Parade” with one million participants.

These two rallies brought into the streets middle class citizens who had held back until then.

Three days later, on June 29, the regime announced dramatic and unexpected concessions, including adopting a direct presidential election system (that couldn’t easily be manipulated by the powerholders).

From that point on the powerholders in South Korea were on the defensive, conceding point after point in their ongoing struggle against civil society (led by students and workers). Political space opened up for economic justice campaigns and struggles for human rights and the environment. The military could no longer hope to intervene successfully against progress by means of the traditional military coup. By 1997 an opposition candidate became president for the first time in Korean history – Kim Dae Jung (who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2000).

South Korea had become a liberal democracy.

Research Notes

Influences:

The democracy campaign influenced South Korean Labor campaigns in the second half of 1987 (2).

Sources:
Nobel Peace Prize biography of Kim Dae Jung: www.nobel-prize-archive.com/kim_dae_jung.htm;


Additional Notes:
The approaching 1988 Olympic Games in South Korea may have played a role in the limited repressive violence during the massive period of protest during June 1987.

The victory in 1987 ushered in a period of accelerated relationship between students and the labor movement; thousands of students even gave up studies to enter factories and shipyards. The later development of mainly middle class movements (environment, women’s, economic justice, and so on) were often led by former students who had developed their consciousness and skills in the context of class struggle.

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