COMMUNICATION AND MARTIAL LAW IN THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA, 1979-1988

Hak Soo Kim
Sogang University
Seoul, Korea

James F. Larson
University of Washington, Seattle

The Republic of Korea has experienced military government almost continuously since Park Chung Hee seized power in a May 1961 military coup. In October 1979 President Park was assassinated by the chief of his own Central Intelligence Agency [CIA]. There followed a brief period in which civilian President Choi Kyu Hah nominally headed the government and which was characterized by high hopes for a civilian-based government. However, by December of that year, General Chun Doo Hwan and military colleagues undertook the first part of a two-stage military coup by replacing the general who was martial law commander under the Choi government. In this commentary on communication and martial law in Korea, we focus only on the period following the assassination of President Park Chung Hee. Our purpose is to analyze government efforts to direct the public through the media as well as the public efforts to find their own direction while struggling with one-sided information from the government.

In the aftermath of President Park Chung Hee’s assassination on October 26, 1979, the Korean people were shocked, and many were bewildered about the direction the nation would take. Park’s assassination by his own CIA chief coincided with a period of rising public protest against the harsh Yushin [Revitalizing Reforms] system of government which had been imposed in 1972.

Media Coverage of the Kwangju Incident

Immediately following the assassination, nationwide martial law was imposed and Prime Minister Choi Kyu Hah assumed the presidency under provisions of the Yushin System. During the month of November there were large demonstrations in Seoul and other major cities, including Kwangju, the capital of South Cholla province and an opposition stronghold. The demonstrators were reacting to years of authoritarian rule and expressing hope for elections and a civilian-based government. At the same time, military leaders had already begun to consolidate power behind the scenes. General Chun Doo Hwan, head of the Military Security Command at that time, emerged as the dominant figure within the military.
The civil unrest continued during the early part of 1980, culminating in the Kwangju incident during May of that year. The incident tragically illustrated the effectiveness of press control under martial law and later the presidency of Chun Doo Hwan. Despite bloodshed and upwards of 200 deaths during the nine-day confrontation between Korean military forces and citizens of Kwangju, there was heavily restricted news reporting of the incident by major print and broadcast media within the nation. At that time many journalists refused to register themselves at the censorship headquarters under martial law, Seoul City Hall, as requested by the martial law command. They had experienced a brief period of great freedom just prior to the Kwangju incident, and they had endured such stringent control for so long under the Park government that it was a natural reaction for them to refuse. Press comment on Kwangju remained strictly limited during the remaining seven years of the Chun Doo Hwan government, despite its central political importance.

Although the military, controlled by General Chun, could restrict domestic reporting on the Kwangju incident, the presence of the Armed Forces Korea Network (AFKN) radio and television in Korea made complete control of news reporting impossible. AFKN's English-language broadcasts include U.S. network television news broadcasts which are relayed via satellite through the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service. Given the strict control on Korean-language media, the U.S. broadcast coverage during the Kwangju incident was unquestionably followed by the majority of highly educated Koreans who speak and comprehend English. Later efforts by the Chun government to restrict press discussion of Kwangju were met with public efforts to make it an issue. Books and other printed material circulated underground. Copies of videotapes made by Japanese, German and U.S. television organizations during their coverage of Kwangju circulated widely among student activists, dissidents and others.

The lifting of martial law in early 1981, after a duration of fifteen months, had little effect on government direction of the press. Under the Park government, control of the press had been overt, with CIA agents physically assigned to all major news media. Under Chun Doo Hwan, responsibility for such control was shifted to the Ministry of Culture and Information, where some former journalists fulfilled this function. Most of these journalists were those who, during the Park government, had worked in overseas cultural centers or other diplomatic posts as a means of advancement into government service. The shift under Chun created a surface impression of change from the earlier Park government, but the underlying system remained the same.

The Kwangju incident illustrates the futility of government efforts to totally direct the media, in the face of public and official concern, both inside and outside of Korea. During and immediately following the incident, Korea was rife with rumors about the tragedy. These grew in proportion to the lack of information, as efforts by the public to find its own sense of truth and direction continued.
Consolidation of Major News Media

On December 1, 1980 the government of President Chun Doo Hwan moved to consolidate the major news media of the nation. As part of the consolidation, the entire news division of the Christian Broadcasting System [CBS] was removed and staff members transferred to the Korean Broadcasting System [KBS]. CBS had enjoyed a reputation for forthrightness and objectivity in news reporting and was the broadcast voice most critical of the government. Other broadcasting systems, newspapers and news agencies were affected by the broadly-based consolidation. The Shin-A Ilbo newspaper was eliminated and both the Dong-A Broadcasting System and the Tongyang Broadcasting Corporation were consolidated into KSB. In addition, four daily business newspapers merged to become two papers.

According to the government, the purpose of the consolidation was twofold. It would eliminate corruption in the media and also make the remaining media more financially sound. By basing the consolidation on these twin purposes, the government was able to lend it an air of legitimacy, since many journalists were known to have accepted bribes, however small, or were involved in related forms of corruption. The most important change brought by the consolidation was the decision to permit only one newspaper in each province. Previously, each province had at least two newspapers. Another aspects of the consolidation and its most distinctive symbol was the merging of two news agencies, Hapdong and Tongyang, to form the new Yonhap news agency. Henceforth there would be only one news agency voice for information flowing into and out of Korea. Furthermore, the major national newspapers, published in Seoul, would be allowed to distribute in local areas but not to station reporters there as they had previously. This change made the Yonhap news agency very powerful by allowing it to largely control the flow of news between the provinces and Seoul just as it dominated the flow between Korea and other nations.

The principal significance of the media consolidation was that it became a vehicle to establish the prominence of a new military power group. Before President Park was assassinated, General Chun was not very well known among either the Korean public or its media. His new power group was therefore urgently concerned with making its status known to both the public and the media. To do so, they opted to consolidate the major news media into a single voice and by so doing to demonstrate their power and leadership to both the public and the media.

The Citizens Boycott of the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS)

Education has historically been a high priority in Korean society, accompanied by near-universal literacy and very high rates of newspaper readership. Television developed rapidly during the 1970’s to the point where it is now an ubiquitous presence and a major source of news and entertainment. In this general context, governmental direction of the press, beginning with the December 1979 consolidation of the media
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by the military government, evoked considerable public dissatisfaction. Although particularly acute among church groups which resented the elimination of news broadcasting by the Christian Broadcasting System, the dissatisfaction was widespread. By the Fall of 1984, it had grown into a grassroots boycott of the government-operated Korean Broadcasting System. The boycott took the form of a refusal to pay the license fee assessed on a monthly basis for each television set owned. Although KBS is also financed partly through on-the-air advertising, license fees were the major source of revenue. However, it was not simply a question of revenues. Both the monthly license fees and advertising were considered necessary to finance the forthcoming 1988 Olympic games. KOBACO, the Korean Broadcasting Advertising Corporation, collected money for such purposes as Olympic facilities, cultural events and broadcast facilities for major international sporting events. The Korean public generally considered this to be a good cause, but it was widely thought that President Chun used some of these funds for his personal political purposes. For instance, these included gifts to workers during presidential trips to the provinces, and money used for government support of favored journalists. During the general election campaign leading up to the national assembly elections of February 1985, the major opposition party added momentum to the KBS boycott by making it a part of the party platform. The underlying significance of the citizens boycott was that the public had come to distrust the government's information, as symbolized by the broadcasts of KBS. The people began to realize that the voices heard on KBS and its news broadcasts did not mesh with their own experience. Therefore, they made the broadcasting system a target.

Developments During 1987-88

During the Spring of 1987, the general political situation in South Korea was at an impasse over President Chun's refusal to accept the demands by opposition leaders for a direct popular election of the president and his intent to transfer power to the head of his ruling party, Mr. Roh Tae Woo. However, on June 29, 1987, Mr. Roh made a dramatic announcement that he favored direct elections and changes to allow free campaigning. President Chun backed these changes. Following the June 29 announcement, the freedom of major news media increased greatly. That freedom contributed to the general perception, inside and out of Korea, that the December 1987 presidential election was generally quite fair. Roh Tae Woo was elected president, owing in large part to a split between the two major opposition leaders.

One illustration on the impact of the June 29 announcement on press control is the founding of a new newspaper, the Hangyerae Shinmun. The paper was founded and staffed by reporters, most of whom were forced to resign from other newspaper under the governments of President Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan. The founders raised money through the sale of stocks. Purchase of these stocks amounted to a donation, since citizens had no expectation of any future profit. The stocks sold well in the first months, but sales dropped in late 1987 during the presidential campaign
when people donated money instead to the political parties. After the election, people resumed their purchase of the stocks and the newspaper published its first edition on May 15, 1988. The paper is published only in Hangul, the Korean syllabic language, with no Chinese characters and is the first newspaper to typeset whole pages horizontally. It is oriented towards pictures and news of non-elites, giving major coverage to matters such as labor, pollution, and human rights. The *Hangyerae Shinmun* is one manifestation of the new direction for the news media in Korea.

**Conclusion**

The most recent period of martial law in Korea was imposed in response to the assassination of President Park, but it remained in force for 456 days, encompassing the Kwangju tragedy of May 1980 and providing the context for establishment of the Fifth Republic of President Chun Doo Hwan. Along with these momentous political changes, the military government sought to provide direction for the public by providing its own interpretation of events. The public saw government efforts to provide direction as opportunistic and one-sided. Such measures as elimination of the highly trusted news broadcasting by the Christian Broadcasting System [CBS] greatly diminished the credibility of the government-controlled media. Furthermore, the public acutely sensed the lack of full information, especially during and immediately following the Kwangju incident. In such an atmosphere rumors flourished and "reading between the lines" of newspapers became a widely practiced skill. More importantly, the public itself engaged in active efforts to establish a sense of their own as well as the nation's political direction, through such efforts as the citizens boycott of KBS and more recently the establishment of new newspapers such as the *Hangyerae Shinmun*.

The Korean experience with martial law and military-controlled government since 1979 underscores the importance of both public and government efforts to shape a nation's future direction by influencing the media. Moves toward democratization and associated changes in the press during 1987 and 1988 suggest the long-term futility of heavy-handed governmental efforts to control the media and their messages. Both the Korean public at large and media professionals appear sensitive to changes in the press system which affect either the credibility of media sources or the range of news and views disseminated through that system.