

# South Korea nears moment of decision

by Linda de Hoyos

After a brief lull June 15-17, new riots erupted in cities throughout South Korea against the government of President Chun Doo Hwan. The protests began on June 10, in protest of the convention of the Democratic Justice Party, at which former Gen. Roh Tae-woo was nominated the leader of the party, ensuring that Roh will become the next president in February 1988, when Chun steps down. The demands of the opposition Reunification Democratic Party, led by Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young-sam, are the demands of the rioting students: The Chun government must reopen negotiations for an immediate amendment to the Constitution which would allow for direct elections of the president and release of all political detainees. In an April decision characterized as "irreversible," President Chun had cut off negotiations on the Constitution in order to ensure stability leading up to the 1988 Olympics to be held in Seoul. This decision has precipitated precisely the grave social crisis Chun was seeking to avoid.

South Korea now faces its most violent rioting since the Kwangju uprising of 1980, in which over 2,000 people were killed in the repression that followed. On June 10-12, the demonstrations against the ruling party included not only the radicalized students, but also middle-class professionals and shopkeepers. However, by June 17, the middle-class participation had receded, as students, organized in paramilitary squadrons, seized control of the streets.

In Seoul, on June 18, the entire central area of Seoul was taken over by militarily deployed students, who fought with the police in the streets. As the *Los Angeles Times* reported the violence in Seoul: "The students blocked major streets and occupied key intersections, hurling rocks and firebombs at ranks of police, who responded with thunderous volleys of tear gas. In at least two instances, squads of riot police were cut off and overwhelmed by protestors." Similar street fighting took place in Incheon, Taejon, Taegu, Pusan, and Kwangju. In each of these cities, students threw barrages of rocks at police, destroyed police equipment and vehicles, and beat police officers. The response from the government—aside from full usage of tear gas—has been restrained. The Chun government is apparently taking heed of messages from the U.S. State Department and the White House to use "restraint" in dealing with the civil unrest.

By the evening of June 18, Roh, who had already asserted

that he would take the primary responsibility for dealing with the crisis, indicated that the government might be willing to make concessions. Although he insisted that the April 13 decision to cut off constitutional debate "cannot be revoked," he said that the timetable for discussions might "be adjusted to reflect . . . the people's aspirations for revision of the Constitution."

On June 19, the crisis was exacerbated when a police officer was killed in Taejon, when students took a commandeered police bus and rammed it into police lines. In response, Prime Minister Lee Han-key called upon the protestors to desist, as the government attempts to maneuver for talks with RDP leaders. "The government and all citizens must exercise restraint, restore reason and patience, and pool our wisdom and determination" to overcome the crisis, said Kim. But he added the warning: "Should it become impossible to restore law and order through such efforts alone . . . it would be inevitable for the government to make an extraordinary decision."

This could be the invoking of martial law, and bringing in the army to quell civil disorder, or it could mean a full-scale military coup.

## The strategic ramifications

The opposition in South Korea has been organized by the same networks of the World Council of Churches and the Theology of Liberation wing of the Roman Catholic Church, who carried out the U.S.-backed "people's power" revolution in the Philippines. However, in the case of South Korea, these networks are challenging a government which considers itself technically at war.

From the standpoint of the global agenda of the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, and their partners in the West, the removal of the Chun government is a precondition for settlement of a "neutralized, unified" Korea, poised against Japan. Although the PRC has attempted to establish ties with South Korea, the Chinese press is echoing the strident tones of North Korean propaganda. The June 2 *People's Daily* declared: "For a long time the Chun clique has maintained its rule by completely relying on bloody suppression. . . . But the fire of the struggle against tyranny and for democracy in the South Korean people will never be put out, and the stubborn dictator will never have a peaceful day."

In the United States, meanwhile, the *New York Times* urged the Reagan administration to take the same actions in the case of South Korea as it effected to bring down Marcos in the Philippines in 1986, blaming the unrest on the administration's "failure to convey clear and consistent signals to Chun on the need to accommodate the new middle-class movement."

Whether the Chun government does make those accommodations or whether it is forced to take "extraordinary decisions," the crisis in South Korea is a signal that the military-strategic framework for Northeast Asia is heading for major change.