

South Korea is far from falling apart

by Lydia Cherry

Violent street battles and isolated incidences of renewed labor unrest across South Korea in mid-May grabbed major press attention by the U.S. and Soviet media, giving the mistaken impression that Seoul once again is in flames and the government tottering. For several days this month, South Korea saw once again the extremely coordinated violent student and worker protests which three years ago brought down the government of former President Chun Doo-hwan. Both on May 10—the first day of the inaugural convention of the new governing Democratic Liberal Party—and again on May 18—the tenth anniversary of the “Kwangju Massacre”—rallies drew over 100,000, with signs reading “Tear Apart the Ruling Party.”

most hard-core radicals engaged in street battles with riot police.

That the Noh Tae Woo government is at the helm during an extremely complex period, is unquestionable. Strategically, Seoul is in a race against time, seeking rapprochement with the militarily stronger North Korea prior to U.S. troop pullback, implicitly under the hegemony of the South and following the impetus of the developments in Germany. At the same time, economically, Seoul is reeling from U.S. trade war pressure as it attempts to build new markets for an economy heavily dependent on exports, especially to the United States.

But despite this, it is misleading to describe the fights in the streets and resultant police clampdowns as a reflection of major government instability or police-state tactics. The nucleus of the hard-core non-party radical opposition in South Korea is not a “natural” movement, but was created from abroad by the ideologies and funding of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and allied institutions, and largely protected by the U.S. State Department. One of President Noh Tae Woo’s larger tasks since his election has been to isolate and contain this radical fringe. It was with this purpose in mind—and viewing the historical stability of Japan’s many-factioned ruling Liberal Democratic Party over three decades—that Noh merged his party with the two most conservative opposition parties to form the new Democratic Liberal Party, isolating the party of WCC politician and radical firebrand Kim Dae Jung.

U.S. and Soviets push anti-Noh line

Moscow’s editorial slant, and that of the U.S. Eastern Establishment media on the South Korea disturbances, have been remarkably similar. “The strikes are unpleasant and unexpected events to the Korean government,”

International Service broadcast in Korean. “The temporary stability has failed to last long. Why has this situation developed in this way? Because democracy in Korea is very crude. Chongwadae [the South Korean presidential residence] and the administration have not removed all legacies of the military dictatorship.”

Commentator Stephen Rosenfeld, writing in the *Washington Post* on May 1, concurred with Moscow: Noh “represents a broad element based in the military but spreading into the society at large that demands a measure of tight control inconsistent with true democratization. . . . More progress must be made in democratizing South Korea before Seoul will be in a position to move by careful stages . . . to reunification.”

Rosenfeld, however, was correct when he wrote that the Koreans’ confidence in the United States is shaky. The South Korean press has reflected concern that decisions will be made behind South Korea’s back at the June summit between Mikhail Gorbachov and George Bush. Diplomacy between North Korea and Washington bore its first tangible fruit May 13, when the North agreed to return the remains of five U.S. soldiers who were missing during the Korean war.

President Noh made a special television address to the nation the night of May 7, acknowledging that “the people’s uneasiness has increased recently”

to leading the nation’s affairs “so that stability is attained in the political, economic, and social domains.”

that despite dissension within the new ruling party ranks, he was not backing away from his “Northern Policy.”

we are faced with an era of change in which . . . East and West Germany have virtually become reunified. . . . The great current of change is surging into the Korean peninsula without exception. We are faced with a crucial period which will determine the destiny of the nation.”

In discussing the problems in the domestic Korean economy, President Noh committed himself to getting control of the speculative economy, and addressed “the sense of prostration of many people, whose dreams for purchasing a house have disappeared due to the increase in housing prices. . . . The government will reform the tax system in such a day as to impose heavier taxes on unearned income and to have the honestly earned income protected.”

new houses will be built for working people by 1992. “It is true that our economic situation has become difficult; Nevertheless, we are in no way faced with a crisis.”

The government on May 14 followed up on President Noh’s promises, by banning until at least Sept. 30 the construction of hotels, department stores, and luxury buildings, in order to stabilize the supply of construction materials for major government projects—housing in particular.