

Can Mubarak Follow South Korea's Path?

by Peter M. Beck

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As the world holds its breath to learn if the Egyptian people's amazing struggle for democracy ends in a breakthrough or a bloodbath, President Hosni Mubarak would do well to consider the South Korea option. Ultimately, Korea's dictators and democracy were both winners.

Like Egyptians, South Koreans endured decades of American-backed dictatorship. In the spring of 1987, Korea's military government held sham elections not unlike the ones held in Egypt last year. However, in both places, a combination of repression and rising expectations proved a combustible mix. If the actual trigger for Egyptians was the sudden overthrow of Tunisia's dictatorship last month, Koreans drew inspiration from the "People Power" overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos in the Philippines the year before.

As in Cairo today, student-led demonstrations drew hundreds of thousands into the streets of Seoul 24 years ago. Like Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, Korea's Christians played a supporting role at the outset. After weeks of clashes and teargas, on June 29 the government announced that a free and fair direct presidential election would be held within six months. Given that almost exactly seven years earlier, the military unleashed a crackdown that killed over 200 citizens, the question we must ask is, what had changed?

When facing persistent social unrest, all dictators invariably undertake a cost-benefit analysis of cracking down versus opening up. In 1980, Korea's coup leaders correctly determined that there would be little or no cost for killing. Indeed, within months of wiping the blood off of his hands, General-turned-President Chun Doo-hwan was one of President Ronald Reagan's first foreign guests at the White House. Later that same year, Seoul was awarded the 1988 Summer Olympics. Far from incurring any costs, Korea's dictators were rewarded for their bad behavior.

China reached a similar conclusion in June of 1989. After two weeks of martial law, the butchers of Beijing calculated that firing on demonstrators in Tiananmen Square would be of great political benefit and little cost. Indeed, economic growth returned to double-digit rates within three years.

In Korea in 1987, by contrast, not only were the demonstrations much larger than in 1980, but the Reagan Administration was now insisting that the Chun regime make the transition to democracy. More importantly, Korean military leaders revealed later that they had considered a crackdown, but feared losing the Olympics if they had turned the streets of Seoul red.

Many pundits have declared that the United States is a mere bystander to the struggle for democracy in Egypt, powerless to shape the outcome. This could not be further from the truth. Not only does the U.S. provide \$1.3 billion a year in foreign aid (largely to the military no less), but the U.S. is also Egypt's leading trade partner.

Since last Friday, the Obama Administration has only hinted that future U.S. assistance could be linked to the government's behavior. If he has not already done so behind the scenes, President Obama must not waste a moment to make it clear to Mubarak that if the Egyptian army opens fire on innocent demonstrators, U.S. aid stops and sanctions begin. If Mubarak still decides to crack down, then it is time to reevaluate all U.S. overseas assistance. If we cannot shape outcomes in the country that is our second leading aid recipient, then it is time to conduct our own cost-benefit analysis.

If President Mubarak has time to read to the end of the Korean case, he might even fully embrace the decision to open up. Largely free and fair elections were held in South Korea in December 1987 as scheduled, but due to a divided opposition, the military's candidate (and a leader of the previous coup and crackdown no less) managed to win the election. We will never know if there would have been a military coup had one of the opposition candidates won. Once a civilian was elected president five years later, Chun and his successor did briefly spend time behind bars, but they are now living out their days as senior statesmen.

Korea's transition to democracy was conservative and gradual, but democracy was the ultimate winner. Korean legislators may still favor fistfights over filibusters, but Korea is now the most vibrant democracy in Asia. It is not too late for Mubarak to start Egypt down that path.

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