

Responses to PacNet #7 -- Can Mubarak Follow South Korea's Path?

Don Gregg, former US Ambassador to Seoul:

Peter Beck is an astute observer, but his PacNet would benefit from a couple of additional, key points.

First, the dictatorial Chun Doo-hwan was the first foreign visitor to the Reagan White House in 1981, but the price of that visit was the freeing of Kim Dae-jung, then under arrest on trumped up charges of treason, and facing a death sentence. Kim went on to become Korea's president and win the Nobel Peace Prize.

Second, the un-named 'military candidate' who won the 1987 election, was Roh Tae-woo, whose term as president was tremendously successful. With the help of President Bush 41, South Korea gained diplomatic recognition from Russia and China, and made great progress in establishing better relations with North Korea. Roh was succeeded by Kim Young-sam and then Kim Dae-jung, the two men who ran against him in 1987.

My predecessor as ambassador to Korea, the late Jim Lilley, was always overly modest in dealing with the role he played in getting the South Korean government to hold the direct presidential election in 1987 that was the key to today's vibrant democracy. Roh Tae-woo, still sadly under-rated in South Korea, was an ideal transitional figure between the military dictatorship of Chun, and the fully democratic administrations of the two Kims. We will be fortunate if such a figure emerges in Egypt today."

USG Official:

I have a few points to add to Peter Beck's fine reminder of the path that Koreans took in 1987, which resulted in the deep rooting of democracy there. One was that although he was a brutal thug, Chun Doo-Hwan did make one promise that he kept: to step down at the end of his term, after the 1987 election.

Many in the US and the ROK believed Chun would not keep that promise, that at the very least he would contrive to remain president at least until the Olympics in September 1988, which was his pride and joy. But he did step down, apparently because he saw that another Kwangju-style crackdown would tear the country apart. The USG had warned the ROKG against further repression as well.

Another point is that, to my recollection, an essential factor in Chun's decision to let his candidate Roh Tae-Woo publicly accede to all the opposition's main demands (esp., direct presidential elections) on June 29, 1987 was the role of the middle class. By then, the Korean middle class had clearly joined the opposition to Chun. It was no longer a question of

students, labor, some religious groups and a few others on the barricades.

Chun and Roh found that the Koreans who were the driving force behind the so-called Miracle on the Han had decided if they could design and build supertankers and ports in Saudi Arabia, produce advanced steelworks and nuclear plants, etc., etc., they should be trusted to pick their own leaders. I don't know what portion of the 84 million Egyptians would be analogous to that vital slice of Korea's population.

I also hope Egypt turns out as well as Korea has!"

Ralph Cossa, President Pacific Forum CSIS:

I also hope the Egyptian scenario turns out as well and as peacefully as the Korean transition did. I worry more about Egypt being the next Iran, where the US (president, Congress, media, etc.) was so eager to move the democratic process forward that it hastened the transition to an even more autocratic government and one that saw (and still sees) the US as the primary enemy. Unfortunately, when I look at Mubarak/Egypt today, I see more parallels to Iran and the Shah than to Korea and Chun/Roh.

Mubarak has said he will not run for reelection this fall. We should be trying to persuade others to allow him to leave with dignity while preparing a smooth transition under Mubarak rather than forcing him to leave in disgrace now.

Peter Beck:

I have been amazed by the responses my article "Can Mubarak Follow South Korea's Path?" has generated in the various places it has appeared. I never dreamed it would be carried by *The Bangkok Post* or *Joongang Ilbo* or *East Asia Forum*. [editor's note: PacNets are frequently reprinted by other media outlets.] Amb. Gregg and the U.S. official offer rich details that were not possible in a 700-word op-ed.

The U.S. official raises a point that is worthy of discussion: How relevant is it to compare the "Miracle on the Han" with Egypt? I would merely point out that South Korea did not reach Egypt's current level of per-capita GDP until the mid-1980s. I'll also never forget having to read sociologist Norman Jacobs' *The Korean Road to Modernization* (1985) during Korea's democratic transition. Jacobs argued that Korea's patrimonial society made democracy an impossible dream.

One *East Asia Forum* reader accused me of a "simple-minded moralism" that ignored U.S. national interest for advocating a get-tough approach with Mubarak. Since when is it in any country's national interest to be on the wrong side of the Egyptian people, not to mention history? We are still dealing with the legacy of a whole generation of Koreans who became anti-American not because we backed Park's dictatorship, but because we were an enabler for Chun's

massacre. Can the U.S. afford that kind of blowback in the Middle East?

One of my mentors admonished me for not mentioning Korea's 1960 Student Revolution. Indeed, soon after I submitted my article, it was as if Mubarak was stealing a page from the Rhee Syng-man playbook. But if Mubarak had read up on Rhee, he could have learned the easy way that street thugs and camel jockeys are not going to solve his problems. Aloha, Hosni!

Finally, I did commit one error of commission: A U.S. diplomat in Seoul at that time wrote me to ask about the 1987 election mentioned in my article. I was not referring to the 1985 National Assembly elections, but to the sham electoral college Chun created to make himself and Roh Tae-woo presidents. It was Roh's nomination that outraged the opposition; the actual "election" had not taken place.

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