Former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung dies

John Chan
3 September 2009

The death of former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung on August 18 at the age of 86 has been accompanied by an outpouring of praise in the local and international media for his role as a "democrat" and champion of peace on the Korean peninsula. He was given a full state funeral on August 23—the first since that for assassinated dictator Park Chung-hee in 1979—presided over by the current President Lee Mung-bak, a member of the right-wing Grand National Party.

US President Barack Obama hailed Kim as "a courageous champion of democracy and human rights" who "risked his life to build and lead a political movement that played a crucial role in establishing a dynamic democratic system in the Republic of Korea". Other international tributes and press obituaries highlighted the attempts on his life by the previous South Korean military dictatorship and his Nobel Peace Prize in 2000 for opening up relations with North Korea.

Behind the rhetoric about "democracy" and "peace," however, Kim represented the interests of sections of the South Korean bourgeoisie who had been marginalised under the US-backed military dictatorship and sought an end to its economic and political restrictions. Like other Asian "democrats" in countries such as Taiwan and the Philippines, Kim came to political centre stage as the emerging globalised relations of production collided with the junta's system of tight national economic regulation. His "Sunshine Policy" was aimed primarily at extending the agenda of market reform to North Korea, opening it up as a new cheap labour platform.

Kim was born in 1924 in a village in the south-western province of Cholla. Despite his poor rural background, Kim received a school education and became a clerk for a Japanese shipping company. Japanese colonial rule of Korea was notoriously brutal, provoking deep resentment and opposition, yet Kim's involvement in the widespread anti-colonial movement appears to have been fleeting at most. Following Japan's defeat in 1945, Kim took over the shipping company, becoming a well-off businessman.

Kim became involved in politics in the turbulent post-war period. As the Japanese military had crumbled in China, the Soviet army rapidly seized Manchuria in 1945 and entered the northern part of the Korean peninsula. To forestall the Soviet advances, the US forced Japan's unconditional surrender through the atom bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, rapidly moved US troops into southern Korea and imposed military rule. The US unilaterally declared the artificial division of the peninsula along the 38th parallel, to which the Soviet Stalinists acquiesced.

From the outset, the US military occupation rested on right-wing groups, anti-communists and former Japanese collaborators who ruthlessly suppressed organisations that had been connected with the anti-Japanese resistance and any expression of popular opposition. The army and police were headed by former Japanese-trained officers. Kim Dae-jung and other "democrats" such Kim Young-sam can trace their origins to the US-backed Korean Democratic Party (KDP), made up of conservative landowners, businessmen and former Japanese state bureaucrats.

As its chief political instrument, Washington brought the US-educated right-wing nationalist Syngman Rhee back to Korea to begin a shaky alliance with the KDP. Lacking any significant political base, Rhee, with the backing of Washington, set about establishing what can only be described as a police state. Following the outbreak of the Cold War, Rhee entrenched his rule through a rigged election in 1948, which marked the end of US military rule and the establishment of the "Republic of Korea".

A CIA report in 1948 entitled "Prospects for the Survival of the Republic of Korea" noted that Rhee had "not hesitated to use such totalitarian tactics as stringent censorship… police terrorism, and… extra-government agencies such as youth corps and armed 'patriotic' societies to terrorise and destroy non-Communist opposition groups and parties". The Rhee dictatorship was to set the political pattern for South Korea until the late 1980s.

Relations with the Soviet-backed regime in northern Korea—the Democratic People's Republic of Korea—were tense from the beginning. Both claimed sovereignty over the entire peninsula. For Stalin, North Korea was simply a convenient buffer and a pawn in his dealings with US imperialism. Having executed the Korean communist leaders in the 1937 purges as "agents of Japanese imperialism," he installed Kim Il-sung, a guerrilla leader, to head the regime. Tensions on the Korean peninsula escalated after the Chinese Communist Party took power in 1949. Military provocations by the Rhee regime eventually prompted a North Korean reaction. To prevent the complete collapse of its puppet regime in the south, the US launched a major military intervention, nominally under the UN flag.

The three years of bloody war that ended in 1953 cost an estimated 2.5 million lives, devastated much of the peninsula and entrenched the division between North and South. While an armistice was signed, the war was never formally ended. In South Korea, the regime tolerated no political opposition. Elections, when they occurred, were always tightly controlled.

It was in this fetid political climate that the KDP, which had been marginalised by Rhee after the 1948 election, attempted to play the role of loyal opposition. In times of crisis, the KDP was brought forward to contain the opposition. Kim, who had been captured by the North Korean army during the war and almost executed, entered politics in 1954 as an opposition activist. He made three unsuccessful bids for a parliamentary seat in the city of Mokpo.

© World Socialist Web Site

Amid mass anti-Rhee demonstrations in 1960, Washington forced Rhee to resign and the KDP temporarily took office. Kim was elected to the national assembly in a by-election in May 1961. Just days after Kim's election, junior generals headed by Park Chung-hee staged a coup that inaugurated nearly two decades of direct military dictatorship. Underlying the political unrest was the fragility of the South Korean economy, which had little industry and was heavily dependent on US financial aid. Park's response was to use the state to begin a forced march to industrialisation. He turned to Japan for investment, signing a treaty in 1965 to normalise relations despite large student protests. In the same year, Park committed troops to the Vietnam War, receiving large American payments in return.

The emergence of Kim and other "democrats" as the focus of opposition to the military dictatorship was the result of a number of factors. The "democrats" had the backing of sections of business that were disadvantaged by the close collaboration between the Park administration, the state apparatus and the major conglomerates or chaebols. As part of the younger generation of KDP politicians, they were not closely associated with Japanese colonial rule. Moreover, other opposition organisations had been destroyed or forced to operate underground.

Under US pressure, Park continued to hold carefully stage-managed elections. In the 1971 election, however, Kim won a stunning 46 percent of the vote—almost defeating Park despite the rigged character of the poll. The result reflected not only support from Kim's own economically backward Cholla province, but a far deeper economic and social malaise. A deepening financial crisis was evidenced in rising bankruptcies and national debt, and resulted in an IMF intervention and austerity measures, including an 18 percent devaluation of the won. Labour disputes reached a record 1,656.

The crisis in South Korea reflected global economic and strategic shifts. In 1971 US President Richard Nixon announced the end of the fixed gold-US dollar exchange rate that had underpinned global economic policies. During the following years, Nixon established diplomatic ties with China at the expense of its Cold War ally, the Kuomintang dictatorship in Taiwan—a move that deeply shocked the Park regime. The danger that Washington could do the same to Park was underscored by the decision to pull a division of US troops out of South Korea.

Park responded to these challenges by a major strengthening of the police-state apparatus, particularly of the notorious Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), a crackdown on all forms of political opposition and a dramatic acceleration of the drive to industrialise, which was extended into basic industry such as steel and ship building.

Kim was not arrested in the initial round-up of opposition politicians as he was in Japan at the time. In 1972, however, the KCIA agents kidnapped Kim, whose life was saved through the intervention of the US. The willingness of Washington come to Kim's rescue confirmed his value as a political safety valve. Kim had always accepted the framework of Cold War, anti-communist politics and continued to promote the illusion that the US would support the democratic reform of the military regime that it helped maintain.

The regime's policies, however, only compounded the underlying economic and political contradictions. The economy, now far more dependent on imports and exports, was hard-hit by the doubling of oil prices following the 1979 Iranian revolution and subsequent recession. The working class, which had greatly expanded over the decade, took part in an unprecedented strike wave.

Amid bitter disagreements over how to deal with mounting social unrest, the KCIA director shot dead Park in 1979. In the political turmoil that followed another military strongman, Chun Doo-hwan, took charge and suppressed all opposition, in particular a major uprising that had been provoked by army atrocities in 1980 in the Cholla city of Kwangju. The junta put Kim on trial for instigating the unrest even though he was in the custody at the time. He was sentenced to death, but saved again through pressure from Washington. His sentence was commuted to life imprisonment; he was released in 1982 and moved to the US until returning to South Korea in 1985 amid rising social tensions.

By the late 1980s, South Korea was one of the much-vaunted "Asian Tigers" and the regime faced a highly combative, industrial working class. In 1987, in the face of nationwide protests of students and workers, the junta was forced to hold a direct presidential election. Like the end of martial law rule in Taiwan in the same year, this partial "democratisation" in South Korea reflected the requirements of the bourgeoisie for an end to national economic regulation, the closer integration of the country into globalised production processes and a more sophisticated means for controlling social tensions.

The junta's Roh Tae-woo stayed in office until 1992 after Kim and his rival Kim Young-sam split the opposition vote in the 1987 election. After losing the 1992 election to Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung announced his retirement from politics. He did, however, make a study of the reunification of Germany, following the collapse of the Stalinist regime in Eastern Europe, with a view to ending the division of the Korean peninsula. His so-called "Sunshine Policy" was based on the conclusion that South Korea simply could not afford to immediately integrate with North Korea and thus should instead encourage its opening up as a separate cheap labour platform.

Kim finally won the presidency in 1997 and took office in early 1998 amid the eruption of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, which had a devastating impact on the South Korean economy. In the three months from November 1997 to February 1998, the country's GDP fell from almost $500 billion to just $312 billion. Per capita GDP plunged from $11,000 to $6,600. Effectively, 37 percent of the economy was destroyed.

Using his credentials as a "democrat" and his influence with the militant Korean Federation of Trade Unions (KCTU), Kim played the crucial role in salvaging South Korean capitalism from the wreckage and imposing the burden of the crisis onto the backs of working people. Forced to borrow $57 billion from the IMF, his administration accepted all its demands for a far-reaching, pro-market agenda.

In early 1998, Kim pushed through what Kim Young-sam had attempted but failed to do—a new labour law that undermined the lifelong employment enjoyed by workers in major private companies, where the KCTU had its main base. As major strikes erupted, he relied on the KCTU leaders to prevent a political confrontation between the working class and the government. He legalised the union body and integrated it into a tripartite committee with business and government to "share the pain". The new labour laws quadrupled unemployment to 8 percent and paved the way for low-paid, temporary workers who now constitute a third of the workforce.

For all his posturing as a defender of democracy, Kim did not hesitate to use the full force of the state apparatus against the working class. Over 200 labour and union activists were arrested in 1998 alone for organising "illegal" strikes. In 1999, Kim ordered the arrest of the entire leadership of

© World Socialist Web Site

KCTU’s main affiliate, the Korean Metal Workers Federation as well as the leaders of several other unions—even though the unions had worked hard to contain industrial unrest. In 2001, he used thousands of heavily-armed riot police to smash a plant occupation by Daewoo Motor workers in Pupyong.

Kim sought a political rapprochement with the right-wing layers that had backed the former dictatorship. Just days after his election, he pardoned two former dictators Chun and Roh, who were jailed by Kim Young-sam for their crimes in the 1980s. He justified their release on the grounds that they had contributed to the country’s rapid economic expansion.

With the backing of the Clinton administration, Kim pressed ahead with his “Sunshine Policy,” which reached its high point in 2000 when he met with North Korean leader Kim Jong-il in Pyongyang. He received the Nobel Peace Prize in the same year. Plans for opening up a free trade zone at Kaesong were announced. The strategy effectively collapsed after President George W. Bush came to power, immediately put negotiations with North Korea on hold, and set course for confrontation by denouncing Pyongyang in 2002 as part of “an axis of evil” with Iraq and Iran.

Kim left office in 2003. His final years were clouded by a scandal involving allegations that he had paid $500 million to North Korea in return for the 2000 summit meeting with Kim Jong-il. The outpouring of praise following his death is in recognition for his political services to capitalism in South Korea and internationally. His whole career is a testimony to the insipid character of liberalism in South Korea and the organic inability of the bourgeoisie to meet the aspirations of working people for basic democratic rights and decent living standards. Those tasks fall to the working class in South Korea as an integral part of the struggle for socialism internationally.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site