

## Student Uprisings in South Korea: Passion for Reunification and a Return to Violent Protest

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In August of this year, thousands of South Korean students demonstrated, trying to march to the 38th parallel, the demilitarized zone, for a joint rally with North Korean students in pursuit of reunification. Prior to the actual demonstration in Seoul, two South Korean students reportedly went to North Korea via Berlin and appeared with North Korean students at Panmunjom, near the demilitarized zone, demanding “safe passage for 100 northern delegates invited to attend the Seoul rally.”<sup>1</sup>

The protest was exceptionally large-scale, and violent confrontations with the police occurred. It is reported that about 10,000 students participated in the protest and several hundred students were arrested. The protest was organized by a nationwide college student organization, Hanguk Taehak Chong Haksaenghwe Yonhap (Union of Korean University Students), which has chapters at 180 universities and colleges and includes about one million student members.<sup>2</sup>

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The recent protest was something of a shock to observers of recent student politics in South Korea. Since the late 1980s and early 1990s, after the collapse of the communist countries and the emergence of civil government in South Korea, student protests have significantly declined. It was thought that college students were no longer interested in politics but were concentrating on their own careers and well being. Citing the examples of many Western industrialized countries and Japan, where student political activism was pervasive in the 1960s and 1970s and then all but disappeared, some observers predicted that student activism in South Korea would follow the same course. There is some truth to this view. The majority of college students do tend to give higher priority to career develop-

ment than to involvement in politics.

However, the recent student protests clearly demonstrate that many students remain seriously involved in national politics and that there are influential student organizations able to orchestrate a large-scale protest like the one in August 1996. As far as major concerns of students go, the recent protest was far from new if one looks at the specific issues that students brought up during their rally. There were four major issues: a peace treaty, withdrawal of the U.S. army forces in South Korea, two-way peace talks between North Korea and the United States, and reunification. These issues and the main theme of reunification were the major concerns in student politics in the 1990s.

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The particular importance of the August 1996 protest seems to be that it showed that reunification is the most important issue on the agenda for the students in the future, which contrasts somewhat with the protests of the 1970s and 1980s. In previous decades, the range of issues students brought up was far wider and more diverse than now, with the autocratic government often the target of attack. However, authoritarianism in the government is no longer an issue for criticism due to civil reforms and more liberal policies throughout the society.

It is important to note that the protest took place around August 15, during the summer recess, when students traditionally did not plan any significant rallies in the past. It is also significant that August 15 is Independence Day and marks the beginning of the division of the nation into north and south in 1945. The Korean peninsula was liberated on August 15, 1945 from the Japanese colonial regime that had been in place for 36 years. On the same day, the two superpowers at the time, the United States and the former USSR, agreed to divide the peninsula at the 38th parallel and allow occupation forces, the U.S. in the south and the USSR in the north. Although the 38th parallel was tentatively drawn before the final settlement,

the dividing line has remained unchanged due to the complexity of domestic and international politics in the era of the Cold War. Given this background, the students' choice of August 15 for a rally clearly shows their major concern for reunification.

There has been much speculation on the connection between South Korean student organizations and North Korea. According to government reports, the Union of Korean University Students shares a similar ideology and strategies for reunification with North Korea, namely federalism, a plan under which the two Koreas would be considered a single nation, but each would be an independent state with its own system of government. It is not clear that student activists receive orders from North Korea. Sharing a similar ideology does not prove that students have special connections with North Korea or get special orders from the North to destabilize South Korea. Indeed, some participants in the rally do not regard themselves as communists.

However, since the mid-1980s, some student activists in South Korea have advocated *Juche Sasang*, which literally means "self-sufficiency" or "self-reliance" and has been known as the unique philosophy of Kim Il-Sung, the late president of North Korea.<sup>3</sup> The *Juche* group was particularly dedicated to the struggle for reunification of north and south. The group has faulted the United States for its influence on South Korean society and asked the United States to admit responsibility for originating and maintaining the division of Korea since 1945. The *Juche* group has been labeled as the most radical faction because of its support for federalization with North Korea. Federalism as a strategy for reunification is the option least favored by the South Korean government. Thus, South Korean students' support of federalization is seen as a direct confrontation with South Korean government.

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The government of South Korea maintains its own agenda on reunification, and it controls all practical efforts toward reunification. Therefore, confrontation between the government and student activists is likely to occur again. The ways in which students present their concerns for re-

unification have been seen as violent and radical. The tactics employed in their recent demonstrations have been highly controversial. The rally in August 1996 resulted in violent confrontations and serious injuries, which alarmed not only the government but also the general public, resulting in the loss of support from other students and the people.

Several questions remain for further examination: how will the students' focus on reunification affect student politics; to what extent, if any, will students' views on reunification be reflected in the government's action toward reunification; and in what ways and to what extent can students contribute to the prospect of reunification on the Korean peninsula.

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These questions need to be understood against the background of a rapidly changing international scene, as the issue of reunification is not only a matter of regional politics but also one of global politics. That is, the reunification on the Korean peninsula will be impacted by changing relations in the post-Cold War era.

#### Notes

1. CNN, August 14, 1996.
  2. *Choson Ilbo*, August 17, 1996.
  3. Kenneth Wells argues that the *Juche* ideology is far from Kim's unique invention. Rather, Korea has a long history of advocating self-sufficiency, and one can trace the origin of the idea back to the 1920s. Kenneth M. Wells, *New God, New Nation: Protestants and Self-Reconstruction Nationalism in Korea, 1896–1937* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), 163.
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