

Statement of Intellectuals in Asia Who Remember the Yushin Dictatorship

A highly important election will be held in December in a country in Asia, known for its exemplary democratization, South Korea. This election, to elect a new President in a presidential polity, is likely to serve a significant testing ground for the future of democratization not only in South Korea, but in Asia as well.

It is because the prominent presidential candidate of the conservative ruling party is none other than the daughter and heir of the late Park Jung-hee, the notorious dictator who took power by military coup and ruled the country with iron-fist control for 18 years. Park Geun-hye played not only the privileged daughter role of the dictator but acted as de facto first lady after her mother died. She won her way to the presidential candidacy through appealing the voters with the successes of Park's regime and calling for restoration of its honor. She thus became the choice of oligarchic political forces who share the nostalgia of the authoritarianism that is Park Jung-hee.

This is very exceptional in South Korea, compared to many countries in Asia where the second generation of powerful families often access to power as a matter of given. Because in South Korea there has been strong people's awareness against inheritance of political power since the 1987's start of democratization from below, such a familiar tradition has failed to gain ground. On the contrary, the children of the two previous Presidents had to go through severe legal and public scrutiny and punishment for their business of political involvement.

We, intellectuals in Asia who clearly remember the terror rule of Park Jung-hee and his Yushin dictatorship, think that what is newly happening in the coming election in South Korea lays dark cloud over the future of democracy. Contrary to the beautified stories that Park's followers make and spread, the days of Park's dictatorship was series of political crisis and Korean people had to suffer from totalitarian control and state violence that resembled the days of the Japanese colonial rule.

1960s and 70s of South Korea was a tragedy. People in Asia and the world witnessed the great violence created by the regime set up by a former Japanese military officer, Park Jung-hee, as innocent citizens, students and opposition leaders were put to kidnapping, illegal detention, ruthless torture, threatening and brain-washing. We still remember how South Korea was decaying from rampant corruption and closed-door politics, and how the whole society turned into a mega military camp. What we remember now was, at that time, a shock and warning, and later the

ground for us to come and act together for democracy. However, we were fortunate to witness, afterwards, the great potential of the Korean people with which they eventually removed military dictators from power and creating a democracy from below. And we worked together to create our own democracy in our own countries. Similar upheavals of people in the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia and elsewhere converged and inspired each other in a Asian wave of democratization.

The possibility of dictator's heir becoming President in South Korea after 10 short years of democratic governments means more than a successful roll-back of conservative forces in the country. Despite great achievements, democracies in Korea and in Asia in general are incomplete and unstable democracies not able to clear up the legacy of old oligarchic political forces in each country. If a second-generation takes the power thanks to such a legacy in South Korea, it would signal denial of all that has been achieved by democratization from below and a fanfare come-back of oligarchic-monopolistic forces.

Just as democratization by people's power had cross-border impact, in Asia, an all-out come-back of oligarchic forces will also have equally spreading cross-border impact. This is more worrisome than before, because economic crisis and political instability that many countries face today may easily find authoritarian come-back as a cure, spreading cure.

It is a vivid record of the history that past military regimes in Asia, seeking ways of justifying their oppressive rule, exaggerated security threats, expanded the military and militarism, equated domestic dissident views as national threats, and mobilized illegal ways of exercising violence against citizens, only to monopolize power, wealth and media into a few hands. The result was devastation of safety and basic livelihood of common people. This remembrance makes us look at the come-back of oligarchic forces in South Korea in nostalgia of late dictator as an ominous sign for the future of South Korea as well as in Asia.

We strongly believe, though, majority of people in South Korea will stand to stop this come-back. Our expressed concern comes from the shock that even a close come-back is possible in a country like South Korea. It is also to make it clear and visionary that heirs of Yushin dictatorship do not turn on a green light for oligarchic forces elsewhere. We believe our cross-border concern for democracy is a small step for genuine justice of people as well as a mutual support for continued development of democracy in Asia. We also appeal everyone to join this statement so that we can envision and create 'Asia' away from the dangerous liaison of crisis and oppression...