

## ASIA AND SOUTH KOREAN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

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The cultural Korean wave, or *hallyu*, is generally understood as the global popularity enjoyed by polished productions of Korean television dramas, movies and music. *Hallyu* owes its origins and possibility to the *minjung* movement that not only lifted the rule of stifling military dictatorships supported by the USA for nearly half a century, but also loosened the creative spirit and expressive capacity of ordinary Koreans—making people into artists and producers of great works of art. For nearly all of the 20th century, Koreans were restrained from freely expressing themselves. When the dam finally broke, the torrent of creativity that emerged resonated internationally. During the harsh period of repression, plays, music, poetry, visual arts and fiction had been media in which a modicum of space existed for the articulation of critical insights. Once a new atmosphere of freedom was constructed, these very same media blossomed in the high-tech global market.

Alongside contemporary cultural productions, South Korea's economic progress and political changes also serve as inspirational models for people around the world. From Sri Lanka (where more than forty thousand people have “disappeared”) to Cambodia, Vietnam, and Burma, people want to accomplish the same kinds of rapid transformations. In Africa and Latin America, the Korean model is enviously scrutinized. In the last decade, as Korean social movement activists have participated in international gatherings of the alter-globalization movement, they have inspired and

instructed. In Cancun in 2003, when protests against the World Trade Organization (WTO) seemed to bog down, several hundred Korean farmers sat down together and wove a rope. When they had finished they organized the crowd of thousands to pull down several police barricades. Farmer Lee Kyung-hae's suicide on the barricades that day continues to be worshipped by indigenous Americans as a heroic and noble sacrifice. In subsequent protests against the WTO in Hong Kong at the end of 2005, dozens of Korean farmers suddenly jumped into the water and swam around police blockades in an attempt to reach the WTO meeting site. Their example resonated internationally, especially because of their courageous capacity for self-organization and action.

As the global community turns its attention to Korean social movements, its gaze naturally focuses on Gwangju. The Gwangju Peoples Uprising and its ultimate victory over the dictatorship<sup>1</sup> have turned tears of sadness and despair into joy and hope. When people from Sri Lanka first came to Mangwoldong Cemetery, they said, "We must build a memorial for our dead." With the help of activist Eugene Soh and artist Hong Song Dam, they did just that. Gwangju's inspirational example was such that after it, a chain reaction of revolts and uprisings swept through East Asia.

Gwangju's "beautiful community," her people's spontaneous creation of a Citizens Army and self-governing Commune, despite all the hardships endured, continues to shine as an example of the capacity of ordinary people to change history. Although overwhelmed in 1980, Gwangju people refused to submit and ultimately motivated South Korea's successful June 1987 uprising, during which nearly three weeks of daily illegal mobilizations by hundreds of thousands of people compelled the military dictatorship to grant direct presidential elections. In the subsequent

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<sup>1</sup> For analysis of the long struggle of the May Movement, see Na Kahn-chae, "A New Perspective on the Gwangju People's Resistance Struggle, 1980-1997," in *South Korean Democracy: Legacy of the Gwangju Uprising*, edited by George Katsiaficas and Na Kahn-chae (London: Routledge, 2006).

process of democratic consolidation, former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were imprisoned, and the South Korean movement became a model for insurgencies throughout Asia.

The 1989 revolutions in Europe against Soviet regimes are well known, yet a Eurocentric (and anti-Communist) focus on them often diminishes the significance of their Asian counterparts, the wave of popular uprisings that swept through the Philippines (1986), Taiwan (1987), Burma (1988 and 2007), Tibet (1989 and 2008), China (1989), Nepal (1990 and 2006), Bangladesh (1990), Thailand (1992), and Indonesia (1998). Here in Vietnam, a member of the Politburo, General Tran Do, publicly asked for multi-party democracy in 1989. These upheavals help us better comprehend actually-occurring popular forms of democratic action involving millions of people at the end of the 20th century.

Moving from the periphery to the center of the world system (a phenomenon most commonly understood in economic terms), East Asia is positioned to take the lead in the unfolding of world political struggles. The huge expenditure of East Asian lives at the hands of United States wars – more than 3 million killed in the Korean War and at least two million more in Indochina – served as crucibles of fire, precipitating refugees by the tens of millions but also conditioning unprecedented movement mobilizations by people who sought to change the direction of their societies' trajectories.

As a geo-political construct, East Asia hardly existed before European domination of the region; the latter was so pervasively powerful that even opposition leaders at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century discovered in the USA a waiting room for future heads of state of American-backed regimes. In the early 1980s, Kim Dae Jung and Benigno Aquino, popular leaders of vast democratic strata and progenitors of US influence, sat together in exile in Newton, Massachusetts, USA, each having escaped death sentences from their countries' USA-backed systems of justice. Getting acquainted and exchanging views on how best to overcome dictatorships, on at least one occasion, they shared breakfast at Aquino's home as they

discussed their situations.<sup>2</sup> Both men's fates were tied to political changes in their homelands. No one would have guessed that their cook that morning would herself be pressed into service as head of state within a few short years.

In 1986, the Marcos dictatorship was overthrown in an uprising initiated by an armed rebellion of key sectors of the military supported by the Catholic Church hierarchy. More commonly remembered are more than a million ordinary Filipinos who gathered to protect the mutineers and stubbornly stayed in the streets despite being continually ordered to disperse by Marcos. Once the bulk of the military defected to the side of the opposition and Marcos left the country, the very words "people power" were enough to frighten even the most entrenched dictators no matter where in the world they ruled.

The Philippine events helped animate the 1987 June uprising in South Korea, a 19-day marathon endeavor in which Christian groups also played a leading role. As South Koreans won democracy, people's movements for democracy and human rights appeared in many neighboring countries. An end to 38 years of martial law was won in Taiwan in 1987, where anecdotal evidence tells of people singing Korean democracy movement songs in the streets.

In Burma,<sup>3</sup> widely popular aspirations for loosening central controls collided with the forces of order in March 1988. As in Gwangju, students led the population into the streets of Rangoon, and the military went on a killing spree supported by ruthless generals holding the reins of the highest levels of power. Despite horrific repression, popular resistance compelled President Ne Win to step down after 26 years of rule. When he sought to name one of the men responsible for the butchery of so many innocent lives as his replacement, five days of new student-led protests forced yet

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<sup>2</sup> Conversation with Ed Baker in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2007. Baker assisted Kim Dae Jung while he was at Harvard.

<sup>3</sup> The military government changed the country's name to Myanmar and its largest city to Yangon, but the democracy movement insists on retaining the old names, and I follow them in that regard.

another resignation. In the resulting vacuum of power, a general strike committee representing workers, writers, monks, ethnic minorities and students emerged as the leadership of a nationwide movement for multiparty democracy. Undeterred by people's clear desires for more liberty and freedom, the military decided to preserve its rule by massacring even more protesters—bringing to as many as 10,000 the number of people it killed that year. Arresting yet thousands more, including over 100 newly elected parliamentarians in the 1990 elections, the Burmese military government ignored the huge mandate won by Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy (NLD) and kept her under house arrest for most of the next 20 years.

In 2007, Burmese monks led a new wave of protests against the military, but once again severe repressive measures, despite intense international protests, were sufficient to quell the incipient revolution. The 2007 uprising began in mid-August after the government announced significant increases in the price of fuel. Only released from prison a few short years before, remnants of the 1988-generation pulled together an alternative leadership to the NLD and organized protests in Rangoon. Soon similar peaceful marches took place throughout the country, but the military rounded up hundreds. Although it appeared the protests had ended, about a month later, monks mobilized by the thousands, and throngs of people joined the new wave of actions. As in 1988, the military responded with great violence, and at least 200 people were killed as the dictatorship quieted dissent.

In the following pages, I compare Korean and Burmese uprisings in order to better understand what leads some uprisings to succeed and others to fail. High on the list of factors leading to successful outcomes for uprisings are two factors: decentralized structures of authority and autonomous initiatives of many diverse grassroots groups.

Gwangju's Absolute Community

The dialectical negation of military repression can be found in the Gwangju People's Uprising of 1980, a shining example of the rapid proliferation of revolutionary aspirations and actions, of a community of love created in the heat of battle. The spontaneous chain reaction of people coming to each other's assistance, the erotic occupation of public space, and the loving embrace in which the city united nearly everyone constitute one of the 20<sup>th</sup> century's clearest expressions of the capacity of hundreds of thousands of ordinary people to govern themselves beautifully and with grace. In few places have so many been able to act with such unity. Universal interests became generalized at the same time that pre-existing values (regional chauvinism, class divisions, hierarchy, possessiveness) were negated. Dubbed the "absolute community," the "organic solidarity" of participants in the Gwangju Commune embodies what I consider to be humans' instinctual need for freedom—grasped intuitively—an unconscious need that was sublimated into collective expression during the uprising.<sup>4</sup> Gwangju people's defeat of thousands of elite South Korean troops led to the revolt spreading from one district to another in South Cholla; the intuitive identification of hundreds of thousands of people with each other and their simultaneous belief in the power of their actions; the self-organization of a Citizens Army; and the suspension of normal values like competitive business practices, criminal behavior, and acquisitiveness. In daily rallies inside liberated Gwangju, tens of thousands of people practiced participatory democracy while

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<sup>4</sup> Elsewhere I have developed the concept of the eros effect to explain the rapid appearance of revolutionary aspirations and actions. By the eros effect, I mean the spontaneous chain reaction of uprisings and the massive occupation of public space—both of which are examples of the entry into history of millions of ordinary people who act in a unified fashion, intuitively believing that they can change the direction of their society. The eros effect is not simply an act of mind, nor can it simply be willed by the "conscious element" (or revolutionary party). Rather it involves popular revolutionary movements emerging as forces in their own right when thousands of ordinary people take history into their own hands. I first developed this concept in relation to the synchronicity of worldwide revolts in 1968; I subsequently extended it in my book on European autonomous social movements after 1968. My trilogy on social movements in urbanized societies after 1968 will be completed soon with *Unknown Uprisings: Gwangju and East Asian Uprisings After World War 2*.

defending their surrounded city from the military. These are all dimensions of what I call the “eros effect.”

In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, high rates of literacy, the mass media, and universal education have forged a capacity in millions of people to govern themselves far more wisely than the tiny elites all too often ensconced in powerful positions. As Karl Marx pointed out long ago, one of the most important products of factory-based industry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a disciplined working class accustomed to collective endeavor, whose members depended upon each other for their welfare. This capacity, Marx believed, equipped the class to lead society forward. In a similar vein of thinking, we can observe that billions of people today are well versed in the practices of collective participation in mammoth events and huge institutions. As Marx expected the dull discipline of factory life to help shape the emancipatory proletariat, so we can observe today that consumer society’s spectacles (like the Olympics and World Cup) help craft an international sense of attachment to each other. Around the world, people identify more closely with each other than ever before. Moreover, we no longer thank God for the king, nor the king for anything. Indeed, many of us increasingly detest even our own “democratic” governments for giving us no choice but that between politicians who advocate wars—but in different places. Linked together by television and the internet, millions of us understand we have created this world—and we can change it into a far better one.

Governments’ and corporations’ scandalous misuse of humanity’s vast wealth, especially evident in the application of new technologies to warfare and “awe” inspiring machines for killing, has also created a collective consciousness among millions of ordinary people that the time for wars is long past, that militarized nation-states with weapons of mass destruction are obsolete and dangerous, that billionaires’ control of our social wealth is an historical anachronism with criminal effects on millions of lives, and that much more democracy is needed (and possible) than that

offered by staged elections between politicians whose differences are no greater than those between Coke and Pepsi.

While the mainstream version of history that dominates the airwaves emphasizes the need for central authorities and social conformity, beneath the radar, people's understanding and self-guided actions constitute a powerful undercurrent. In the late 1980s, a worldwide anti-nuclear weapons movement erupted and helped end the Cold War. On February 15, 2003, autonomously organized actions in the streets were dubbed a "second superpower." With no central organization, more than 15 million people took to the streets to protest the second US war on Iraq, even though it had not yet started. These two examples only begin to indicate the potential of global people power.

During the "absolute community" of the Gwangju uprising, people's capacity for self-organization and self-discipline is beyond the belief of many North Americans, unaccustomed as we are to even the most rudimentary forms of civil behavior in public spaces. In comparison to the legendary Paris Commune of 1871, one observes a far-greater capacity for self-government among crowds of ordinary people in Gwangju in 1980. Whereas in Paris the pre-existent National Guard and its officers defected en masse to the Commune with the roll of drums, the people of Gwangju organized their own militia from below and then expelled tens of thousands of crack troops whose modern US-supplied weapons were no match for the power of the people. They went on to govern themselves through daily gatherings of tens of thousands of people, a form of participatory democracy that went far beyond the elections and republican government of Paris in 1871.

Sociologist Choi Jungwoon's classic study<sup>5</sup> developed the notion of the "absolute community" to describe the collective energy which arose among Gwangju people as they battled the brutality of the paratroopers and drove the military out of the city:

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<sup>5</sup> Choi Jungwoon, *The Gwangju Uprising: The Pivotal Democratic Movement that Changed the History of Modern Korea* (Paramus: Homa and Sekey Books, 2006).



In this community, there was no private ownership, other people's lives were as important as one's own, and time stood still. In this community, discriminations disappeared, individuals were merged into one, and fear and joy were intermingled. Distress at the end of one world coexisted with confusion at the beginning of a new world, in which emotion and reason were reborn... The key to this absolute community was 'love'—in other words, a human response to noble beings...the struggle at the moment was an exciting self-creation...the intuitive nature of human dignity does not lie in the act and the result of pursuing individual interests and social status, but can be found in the act of recognizing a value larger than individual life and dedicating oneself to attaining it.<sup>6</sup>

After the military was driven out, the city was free. Markets and stores were open for business, and food, water and electricity were available as normally. No banks were looted, and "normal crimes" like robbery, rape or theft hardly occurred—if at all. From below, people created mobile strike forces and formalized a Citizens Army, settlement committees, and a Struggle Committee; they cared for corpses and grieving family members, healed the wounded, and cleaned up the liberated city. The Citizens Army instructed all civil servants, including the disarmed police, to return to their posts; they took charge of gasoline distribution, traffic control, and information coordination. Tens of thousands of people gathered for seven rallies in five days; negotiations with the military were conducted intensively; and a daily *Fighters' Bulletin* helped organize resistance to the impending counterattack—all without a centralized authority giving people orders from above,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., pp. 85, 131.

whether from a Supreme Commander or central committee. The rallies became the crowning achievement of the uprising. They were direct democracy. As one member of the Citizens Army told me, they “took the results of the rallies and planned and implemented the people’s decisions.” Even though the rallies were huge, many different kinds of people gathered—farmers, workers, housewives, students, priests, monks, seniors, shoeshine boys and waitresses—and everyone was able to express heartfelt needs.<sup>7</sup>

To situate these unique dimensions of the Gwangju Uprising’s character, I compare it to the 1988 uprising in Burma.

#### Burma 8-8-88

The winds of change emanating from the Philippines and Korea inspired activists in Burma, a country with a long history of government violence against protesters. Students have long been in the forefront of Burmese struggles. In 1920 and 1936, they led strikes against British colonial rule. After independence was won, a military coup early on the morning of March 1, 1962 brought a Revolutionary Council under the control of General Ne Win into power. Many prominent political leaders were arrested, and others simply disappeared as Ne Win declared the country was on the road to a “Burmese Way to Socialism.” Burma’s army was firmly in control of the country, and as it became, in Samuel Huntington’s ill-advised phrase, the “motor of development,” rapes and killings of ethnic peoples became as commonplace as the theft of their lands.

Faced with the advent of dictatorship, the country needed only an excuse to rise. Once again, it was students who initiated the movement. When final examinations were improperly leaked at Rangoon University in July 1962, students immediately went into the streets. They barred the university to the police by shutting the

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<sup>7</sup> For more on Gwangju, see my article, “Remembering the Kwangju Uprising,” *Socialism and Democracy*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Spring-Summer 2000), available at <http://eroseffect.com/articles/rememberingkwangju.pdf>. At the beginning of the new millennium, when the South Korean government announced new transliterations of Korean names, Kwangju became Gwangju.

main gate, and proclaimed Rangoon University a “fortress of democracy.” Inside the campus, consensus favored the restoration of democracy. The rector refused to be flexible and left the campus; soon thereafter, the military gunned down hundreds of students. The next day, the Student Union Building, center of the movement and long-time symbol of the students’ struggle against British rule, was dynamited.

Under the military dictatorship, Burma slid downward. Those in power pillaged its economy, and its political system served the generals at its top. By 1987, Burma was granted the status of Least Developed Country by the UN. Its massive foreign debt and non-existent foreign exchange reserves caused the government to demonetize 25, 35 and 75 kyat notes—making 60-80% of the currency in circulation worthless. In this atmosphere, any spark could have set off a major confrontation.<sup>8</sup> No one could have guessed it at the time, but a tempest in a teashop would quickly develop into a nationwide general strike and popular insurrection against the 26-year-old military dictatorship.

On March 12, 1988 students from Rangoon Institute of Technology (RIT) were drinking tea in a café near campus. As they were listening to a new album that they had brought with them, drunken rowdies who didn’t like their music attacked them, severely injuring one student. The police arrested the rowdies, but when they discovered that one of them was the son of the local People’s Council chairman (the government’s local arm), they released them. A few dozen students then protested the police failure to act, and riot police (*Lon Htein*) were called. In the ensuing clash, one student was shot to death.<sup>9</sup>

Outraged by police misconduct, students met until midnight, and organized peaceful campus protests. Nonetheless, *Lon Htein*

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<sup>8</sup> Aung San Suu Kyi wants us to remember that the uprising was a product of more than economic hardship—also “the humiliation of a way of life disfigured by corruption and fear.” See her book, *Freedom from Fear* (London: Penguin Books, 1991), p. 181.

<sup>9</sup> Bertil Lintner’s *Outrage: Burma’s Struggle for Democracy* (London and Bangkok: White Lotus: 1990) provides a compelling and detailed report on these events.

invaded RIT on March 15, arresting hundreds of unsuspecting people. The next day, students from nearby Rangoon University (RU) rallied. As their ranks swelled, someone suggested marching to RIT, and thousands of students, fists pumping the air amid chants for democracy and an end to one-party rule, embarked for RIT. High schoolers and citizens quickly swelled the ranks of the march, but hundreds of *Lon Htein* near Inya Lake brought everyone to a halt. The crowd sang the national anthem and even the Army Song, but soon the riot police charged, inflicting a level of violence unimaginable to most of us. When the carnage ceased, dozens lay mortally wounded—some placed the number of casualties at more than 200. Despite the brutality, workers, slum residents and students had stood up to the regime—a threat that could not be ignored.

The next day, the police invaded RU campus and arrested more than a thousand people. On this sweltering day, people were packed so tightly into police vans that dozens died of suffocation when they were left in the sun. Such inhuman repression bred resistance; in this case, youthful intelligence led the new generation of activists to reach out to their predecessors from the 1970s, and with their advice, a new student union was quickly established. Its information department produced and distributed leaflets. A social welfare department collected money and provided food and water to the rallies. Most ominously, however, an intelligence unit, called the “protection department,” was also formed to identify infiltrators. A prison was set up in a dorm, and three students who were found guilty of informing were actually executed by the newly constituted authority.<sup>10</sup>

The movement’s popular support was again manifest when 300 students who suddenly converged around Sule pagoda in the heart of Rangoon saw their ranks swell to more than 10,000 people within an hour. Slum residents, workers and students joined together to rise against the military. All over the city, people

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

acted—some blocked fire engines, even setting one on fire—while others selectively picked out government targets for destruction. On March 18, government buildings in downtown Rangoon were engulfed in flames. A West German tourist provided an eyewitness description: “The people were very selective. They smashed traffic lights, burned government cars and targeted other state property. I did not see any destruction of private property or widespread looting.” Scores were killed as people braved the military’s guns with rocks and Molotov cocktails. The city’s crematoria billowed black smoke as the military destroyed the bodies they had killed, but a first wave of movement leaders was born, and organizations were steeled in the crucible of murderous violence. Across the country, colleges were closed down as fighting broke out.

When the campuses finally reopened on May 30, monks and textile workers joined in the meetings, and high school students massively rallied to the movement. All universities in Rangoon responded, as did students in other areas—notably in Pegu and Moulmein. Mini-demonstrations seemed to appear out of nowhere, scattering leaflets denouncing the regime and calling for action against it—before disappearing as quietly as they had assembled. When students again sought to march to downtown Rangoon on the 21<sup>st</sup>, the military attacked, running over two 13-year-olds. People from the neighborhood then counterattacked, and for the first time *jinglees* (sharpened bicycle spokes fashioned into poisonous darts) were fired from catapults at soldiers. Protesters scattered throughout the city, and were joined by throngs of people—street vendors, workers, and even gangs fought bloody battles against soldiers and police. When a female student who had been holding students’ fighting peacock flag was forced into a police station, people stormed the building and got her released. At least ten *Lon Htein* were killed, and perhaps ten times as many civilians. In Pegu on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, some 70 people were killed before order was restored.

Although a dusk-to-dawn curfew was in force, some students defied it and announced the creation of a strike center in Shwe Dagon pagoda—headquarters of the strikes in 1920 and 1936. The

dictatorship's curfew wreaked havoc with outdoor markets, and prices of essential foodstuffs doubled or tripled. The government tried to blame Burma's problems on its Muslim minority, and a wave of sectarian violence swept the country, even reaching Ne Win's hometown. (One-third of Burma's people are ethnic minorities; and the regime has long used these divisions to stay in power.)<sup>12</sup>

Worried that a popular uprising was in the works, the government made concessions. Imprisoned students were released, and officials in charge of the police resigned. Most startling was Ne Win's sudden announcement that he would step down and that the country would get a multi-party democracy. Hopes for real change soared but soon gave way to disbelief and anger when it was announced that Sein Lwin, *Lon Htein* chief and commander of the troops who had so bloodily suppressed student demonstrations in 1962 and 1988, would be his successor. Quietly optimistic, people compared Ne Win to Marcos, both of whom had amassed huge personal fortunes from public funds; they hoped that he, like Marcos, would be forced into exile by the advent of a multiparty democracy, and that Sein Lwin would soon follow.

Determined to change the system, people prepared for massive protests on 8-8-88, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a high point of the anti-British struggle. The first venue in which the protests were announced was in the popular monthly magazine, *Cherry*, where a cartoonist drew the Statue of Liberty breaking chains in the shape of four 8s. The BBC picked up the story of the date and helped spread news of it throughout the country.<sup>13</sup> On August 1, the underground All-Burma Students' Union sent out teams of students distributing leaflets calling for a general strike on 8888. The teams would suddenly appear at bus stops and teashops, distribute the leaflets, and then vanish into the city. "Strike" meant much more

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<sup>12</sup> Michael A. Beer, "Violent and Nonviolent Struggle in Burma: Is a Unified Strategy Workable?" in *Nonviolent Social Movements* edited by S. Zunes et. al., (London: Blackwell, 1999) p. 182.

<sup>13</sup> See the discussion in Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, pp. 90-92.

than a particular workplace stoppage, or even an industry going out; rather it indicates a general closure of businesses and everyday activities in an area so everyone could go in the streets, like the Indian *bandh*. On August 2, monks joined students outside the Shwe Dagon and appealed for national actions against the regime. On the 3<sup>rd</sup>, after a spirited demonstration in Rangoon, the military declared martial law in Rangoon—but the public largely ignored it. Demonstrations continued to be peaceful and spirited. In Maung Maung's words: "The crowds were big in Rangoon and grew bigger and bolder, defying military administration, curfew and orders to disperse. Restraint on the part of troops who patrolled the affected areas only encouraged the crowds, who called upon the soldiers to join them and establish 'people power,' a popular term borrowed and applied with strained analogy. Young girls garlanded soldiers and coaxed them to throw in their lot with them. Often the surging sea of people threatened to swallow the troops."<sup>14</sup> Borrowing the term "people power" was more than an analogy, since that implies the existence of an other for comparison. "People power" has become a signal of the identification of protesters with previous insurgencies, of their melding into one movement. It indicates the construction from below of a general will and intuition that the time has come to live differently, to break the old structures.

At 8:08 a.m. on the morning of August 8, 1988, Rangoon dockworkers walked off their jobs, a signal for the general strike. In the words of one of the people involved in late-night meetings the night before, "There was actually no central organization for the demonstrations."<sup>15</sup> That day, as hundreds of thousands of people stopped daily life, it seemed as if every group in the diverse country

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<sup>14</sup> Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma* (New Haven: Yale Southeast Asian Studies, 1999) p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, p. 95. Another highly reliable source maintains the strike was organized solely by the All-Burma Students Democratic League. See *Burma's Revolution of the Spirit: The Struggle for Democratic Freedom and Dignity* by Alan Clements and Leslie Kean (Hong Kong: Aperture, 1989), p. 36.

was involved in the protests. All through the city, people marched behind colorful banners and in solidarity with each other. Notable was a disciplined column of monks who carried their bowls upside down as a sign of the general strike. The people's festive mood was reflected in their calling the massed soldiers "elder brothers" and urging them to join the uprising. These biggest Burmese protests in memory were answered by days of bloody massacres in which hundreds of people were killed.<sup>16</sup>

Interim ruler Sein Lwin was compelled to resign on August 12. People again rushed into the streets; dancing happily, they banged pots and pans, laughed, cried, and celebrated their victory. Joy was everywhere evident as a "carnival of democracy" transpired. The previously spontaneous movement began to organize itself more systematically. Monks and street gangs took over the task of providing security. As government officials abandoned their offices, strike committees moved in. It seemed that every group of citizens, from transvestites to gravediggers and blind people,<sup>17</sup> organized strike committees; victory parades were hastily assembled; newspapers were published; representatives were sent to other cities and regions. In Mandalay, a committee of monks and lawyers organized daily rallies. In more than 200 of the country's 314 towns, strike centers emerged. According to Maung Maung, "banks and telecommunications, departments, railways, petrol dumps, were under the control of the dissidents."<sup>18</sup> In areas where Muslims and Buddhists had only recently been fighting, unity prevailed. "Communal frictions and old grudges were forgotten, and maybe for the first time ever, all national and political groups across the country joined together for a common cause...The yellow banner of Buddhism fluttered beside Islam's green flag with

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<sup>16</sup> On 8-8-88 alone at least 360 people were killed. See *Voices from the Jungle: Burmese Youth in Transition* (Tokyo: Center for Christian Response to Social Issues, 1989), p. i.

<sup>17</sup> Vincent Boudreau, "State Repression and Democracy Protest in Three Southeast Asian Countries," in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture and the State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> Maung Maung, *The 1988 Uprising in Burma*, p. 226.



the crescent moon.”<sup>18</sup> Priests paraded with signs reading, “Jesus Loves Democracy.”

Rock groups serenaded demonstrations, and workers in factories and offices formed independent trade unions. Railroad workers announced they would not provide any more special trains for “dictators of the one-party system.” In North Okkalapa, where the fighting had been intense, people erected a concrete monument 8 feet 8.8 inches high in memory of their lost ones. In neighborhoods near the Rangoon General Hospital, people donated blankets and pillows for the wounded; even black market vendors with medicines freely handed over their wares. Local Citizens committees took over the normal functions of the police. Citizen patrols and monks often were the judges when a criminal was brought to justice. In many places, monks also supervised garbage collection, made sure water was available, and directed traffic. For some time, it appeared that Buddhist harmony was a “technology of resistance” directed against authoritarian state power.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the opportunity for a collective leadership to form, the strike committees opted instead for a few prominent personalities to emerge when they convened a meeting of national figures whom they hoped could navigate a peaceful way forward. The chosen few included Aung San Suu Kyi, General Tin Oo, former prime minister U Nu, and Aung Gyi. They came together briefly, but could not reach unity. On the afternoon of August 25, Aung San Suu Kyi had addressed a gathering of at least 500,000 people. Visiting Burma from England to attend to her sick mother, she was not well known and had remained politically neutral until the massacres convinced her—like so many others—to get involved. Sickened by the regime’s violence, thousands of people resigned from the ruling party, which quickly lost its membership base. Defections from the government were so massive that even

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<sup>18</sup> Lintner, *Outrage: Burma’s Struggle for Democracy*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> William A. Callahan, *Cultural Governance and Resistance in Pacific Asia* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006), p. 94.

journalists who worked for the government's press went on strike, saying they would "no longer broadcast propaganda." Like no one else, however, the daughter of national hero Aung San galvanized the opposition into a unified force.

On September 8, more than a million people marched in Rangoon and Mandalay, and three days later, the Parliament voted to end one-party rule. Many soldiers and policemen were by now joining in the protests, On September 9, 150 air force members went on strike, and two other units soon did so as well. Uniformed columns of police, complete with their bands, also attended the demonstrations. In the opinion of Bertil Lintner, one of the most knowledgeable observers at that time, "Any high-ranking army officer who had taken an armed infantry unit into the capital and declared his support for the uprising would have become a national hero immediately, and the tables would have been turned." No such hero stepped forward. Rumors circulated wildly. One, closely resembling a rumor in Gwangju in 1980, told of a US aircraft carrier entering Burmese waters to "liberate Rangoon."<sup>20</sup>

On September 18, hundreds of thousands of people mobilized into the streets of Rangoon and remained there; the next day, however, carefully placed machine guns opened fire, and troops in formation appeared suddenly and fired indiscriminately into the crowds. Nearly every strike center was attacked, schoolgirls shot dead, funerals attacked, and even two young boys shot in front of their parents in South Okkalapa. All through September and October, homes and monasteries were raided, police with photographs sought out suspects from the turmoil of the past weeks, arresting or summarily executing them, and hundreds of government workers were arrested or fired. When the new military regime issued an ultimatum on October 3 for people to return to work or face severe consequences, the strike collapsed. Although the National League for Democracy won the subsequent elections,

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<sup>20</sup> Lintner, *Outrage: Burma's Struggle for Democracy*, p. 127.

the military rulers of Burma have used the iron fist to remain power for nearly two decades.

On May 18, 2004, Win Khet, member of the central committee of the National League for Democracy, accepted the Gwangju prize for Human Rights on behalf of Aung San Suu Kyi. He summarized the impact of Gwangju on his movement: “We appreciate the Gwangju Democratic Movement, the cornerstone of Korea’s democracy, very much and firmly believe it is a role model for all the fighters for the institution of a genuine democratic federal union based on equality and self-determination in Burma.”

#### Autonomy and Centralization: Comparing the Two Uprisings

As examples of ordinary people taking power into their own hands, the Gwangju and Rangoon Uprisings were precursors of a truly free society from which people all over the world can learn. On the surface, both uprisings grew out of remarkably similar conditions.<sup>21</sup> Military dictators, who were themselves former military heads:

- established themselves via coups d’état
- suppressed democracy
- appointed their own successors (themselves stained with the blood of citizens)
- applied martial law on their own territory

In both countries, student demonstrations against the government started the uprisings. The fact that the government had a hand in killing students angered a broad spectrum of people since students symbolize purity and hope for the future. People felt their voices were not being heard, and anger grew when dictators named successors who were unpopular due to their roles in the killing of unarmed people. In both cases, after the military butchered its own citizens, they destroyed or disposed secretly of corpses and reported a lower numbers of deaths than actually occurred.

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<sup>21</sup> I would like to acknowledge the help of Krystal Rodriguez in this section.

Despite these similarities, there are also tremendous differences between South Korea and Burma. A Confucian society, South Korea is the world's 13th largest economy, a member of OECD, and a "semi-peripheral" country with modern infrastructure, advanced production facilities and burgeoning high-tech sector. The ROK's economic growth over the past 30 years has been spectacular. Per capita GNP, only \$100 in 1963, exceeded \$20,000 at the beginning of 2008. With a democratic system in place since 1992, Korea's economy has expanded and moved into high-tech industries. While global statistics are only now becoming standardized, the ROK is often considered the "world's most wired society."

By contrast, Burma is an economic basket case—one of the world's poorest countries. Economists estimate an average family of five needs more than 80,000 kyat (about \$110) a month to live, including food, medicine and transport (but excluding luxury goods). The average monthly income of a professional worker—teacher, university professor or government official—is less than 10,000 kyat (\$13). Human-rights groups say forced labor is still used in Burma. In 2007, there were only two internet servers in all of Burma. Unlike South Korea's "developmental state" (the military dictatorship's policies aimed at expanding the nation's economy), Burma is a "predatory state" (whose government steals lands from the numerous ethnic minorities and forces millions of people to provide free labor to state projects).

Economic differences aside, other significant variations can be located in the uprisings. While Gwangju people united as one into an "absolute community" and general assemblies of tens of thousands made important decisions at "Democracy Square," Burmese protests lacked both the graceful unity of all people and the capability to have daily meetings of tens of thousands in a liberated space. In May 1980, during the brutal reality of military attack, the people of Gwangju beat back the paratroopers and briefly tasted freedom. The example they set in their spontaneous capacity for self-government and the organic solidarity of the population surpassed the capability of the Burmese uprising.

Despite official US reports to the contrary, there were no executions in Gwangju. My interviews with more than 50 members of the Citizens Army (excerpts of which were published in two volumes in Korean) revealed that many captured soldiers were released unharmed by the insurgents. One soldier was even given back his rifle (but not his ammunition) so his superiors would not punish him. The situation in Burma was far different: many suspected infiltrators were executed; in some cases, crowds cheered when captured policemen were publicly beheaded without trials.

After the government suddenly released thousands of imprisoned criminals in Rangoon, districts were compelled to erect street barricades to prevent criminals from overrunning them. Despite the festive feelings in the protests, rising crime rates led many people to build bamboo fences around their neighborhoods. In some cases, guard forces consisting of monks were also organized.<sup>22</sup> This phenomenon is the opposite of what occurred in the case of Gwangju; the discrepancy between the two cases is even greater when we recall that in Gwangju, dozens of people died assaulting the city's prison in attempts to liberate prisoners. In Burma, the government released prisoners since it knew they would terrorize the populace.

While neither uprisings was centrally managed, the Burmese one was pre-planned and began precisely at 8:08 am on 8-8-88, while the Gwangju People's Uprising was a spontaneous reaction to the military's brutality. Dating the uprising's beginning to May 18 only marked one of many actions prior to the expulsion of the military (i.e. when Chonnam National University students broke the police blockade of their university). Whereas in Rangoon, Aung San Suu Kyi and a small group of notables soon became the movement's leadership, no such personality emerged in Gwangju. Although the military blamed Kim Dae Jung, he was in prison during the entire uprising and did not even know about it until weeks after it happened. Before the uprising began, dozens of other

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<sup>22</sup> Confirmed to me in e-mails with Bertil Lintner, April 9, 2006.

activists had been arrested as well, creating a vacuum on the streets within which the popular movement developed fresh organizations and collective leadership.

Rather than being vertically structured, the Citizens Army was organized horizontally with no central authority or single most important leader having the final power to make decisions. The decentralized and autonomous character of the Gwangju Uprising served to strengthen the movement. With no central command or lone charismatic leader, the integration of small groups' initiatives was sufficiently powerful to drive the military out of the city during the night of May 21; people themselves became their own government; and essential needs were met directly through cooperation.

In contrast to the prevailing view of centralization meaning strength and efficiency, does the decentralization of Gwangju uprising indicate the power of autonomy and decentralization? Do these factors (unity, participatory democracy and spontaneity) indicate greater chances for an uprising's success? Alongside these indications of the unrealized potential of human beings, Gwangju's movement led to concrete gains—the overthrow of the military dictatorship, establishment of formal democracy in South Korea, and the inspiration of other democratic movements.

The past twenty years of repression and brutality in Burma speak volumes to the disadvantages of centralized leadership. Aung San Suu Kyi has been under house arrest for most of those years; her heroic commitment to a strict form of non-violence has meant that the movement's central organization marginalized episodes of armed struggle among ethnic minorities in the country's periphery, and the government was able to defeat these insurgencies one-by-one.

Although armed, the Gwangju Peoples Uprising is remembered in Korea as a non-violent movement since it stopped the brutality of the military. Lest anyone recite the oft-repeated myth that the Philippines 1986 overthrow of Marcos was strictly non-violent, they would do well to consider that the movement was led by an armed rebel force that used their weapons with lethal precision to take control of two television stations, denying Marcos

his only conduits to release statements. Moreover, on February 24, rebel helicopters attacked Villamor Air Base to destroy loyalist helicopters; around the same time, a rebel helicopter attacked Malacañan Palace.<sup>23</sup>

Gwangju's victory meant activists were able to turn their energies to the international arena. Not content to remain a monument to their martyrs, Gwangju activists fought for international justice. In 1993, they helped organize the first of more than five international conferences on the May Uprising. In 1997, a foreign correspondents' reunion took place, and a book was published based on these journalists' first-hand experiences during the uprising.<sup>24</sup> Several youth camps were organized in Thailand and East Timor to educate new generations of activists. The May 18 Memorial Foundation was established, and it continues to organize international activist gatherings, to award an annual Human Rights Prize, as well as to publish materials that help broaden the aims of democracy and human rights.

#### Concluding Remarks

Popular intuition often anticipates forthcoming political upheavals with greater efficacy than predictive science or leftist prognostication. This may be the case with two recent movies, *V for Vendetta* and *Children of Men*. While vastly different in their plots, both films close with popular uprisings against monolithic imperial behemoths. Having destroyed much of humanity's gentle side through systems of total control, the anticipated future governments leave people no alternative but to rise up and overthrow the whole wretched system.

Long ago, postmodernists denied the possibility of system transformation (many even refused to acknowledge the system's existence). Most observers today reject the possibility of uprisings

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<sup>23</sup> See the excellent book, *People Power: An Eyewitness History*, Monina Allarey Mercado, Editor (Manila: The James B. Reuter, S.J. Foundation, 1986) pp. 226, 232, 258, 308.

<sup>24</sup> *The Kwangju Uprising: Eyewitness Press Accounts of Korea's Tiananmen*, edited by Henry Scott-Stokes and Lee Jai Eui (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2000).

in countries most central to the promulgation of neoliberalism and war—the UK and the US. Yet these two films inject precisely such a contingency into the matrix of moviegoers’ imaginations, thereby offering us more to chew on than many tomes churned out by the social movement industry or even by “left” presses. Despite television’s everyday portrayals of quiescent accommodation, struggles of epic proportions today animate millions of people’s lives, and new models for revolutionary social movements are rapidly emerging in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Latin America is embroiled in arguably the most significant transformation of its political and cultural landscape since Columbus. From the Zapatistas to the comunards of Arequipa (Peru), people’s daily lives are being bettered through ballots, protests and all kinds of political activism—including popular insurrections. In the aftermath of the fall of communism, people’s movements in Latin America have seen a revival of action and successfully taken political power in many countries. In Venezuela, the Chávez government has instituted a Bank of the South, whose goal is to dislodge the International Monetary Fund and World Bank’s predatory hold on the region’s economies. They have nearly paid off Venezuela’s entire foreign debt and lent other countries vast sums at reasonable rates of interest. “All Power to the People!” is a slogan with origins in the Black Panther Party, but today it is used by Chávez’s Bolivarian government to encourage popular action from below. Although this movement owes much to Chávez, it is not confined to him or to Venezuela. In Bolivia and Ecuador, popular leaders reflect the grassroots movements’ widening base. Rather than being led by a single leader or party,

...the new model of state transformation in South America is rooted in building a broad political coalition based on a complex mixture of progressive social actors and movements. The very role of political parties in this process is the subject of intense debate. Many reject the centrality of parties, arguing that they are



inherently hierarchical (and often patriarchal) and thus antithetical to authentic popular participation. Others assert that “parties of a new type” are needed, like Bolivia’s Movement Toward Socialism, which defines itself as a “party of social movements.”<sup>25</sup>

Although not well known, the series of uprisings in East Asia in the last three decades validates the capability of people to organize themselves directly without the “leadership” of professional politicians. In this article, one of the key lessons of the uprisings in Gwangju and Burma is the greater efficacy of grassroots insurgencies compared to top-down ones. The continuing stalemate in Burma is testimony to the weakness of centralized leadership, especially that based upon a single charismatic individual.

These uprisings help enrich our understanding of the possibilities of revolutionary change—and obstacles to it. The history of 20th century revolutions reveals that the system of neoliberalism and war-regimes that today rules over the bulk of humanity’s accumulated wealth cannot be transformed unless its strongest links are broken. If we wish to qualitatively transform the existing world system, the idea of a global popular insurrection should be considered—all the more so since internationally synchronized actions increasingly occur and recent uprisings have shown peoples’ capacity for self-organization. Will the cacophony of revolts in East Asia after Gwangju, coupled with new insurgencies in Latin America and elsewhere, lead to a harmonized anti-globalization uprising?

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<sup>25</sup> See Roger Burbach, “Ecuador’s Popular Revolt: Forging a New Nation,” in *NACLA Report on the Americas*, Vol. 40, No. 5 (September/October 2007) p. 5.