

KIM DAE-JUNG

by *Donald Kirk*



Former president of South Korea and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. The Sunshine policy of reconciliation between North and South Korea is the principle legacy of the five-year presidency of Kim Dae-Jung, inaugurated on 25 February 1998 after a narrow victory over a conservative opponent. “DJ,” as he was known in the headlines and in daily conversation, formulated this policy during his years as a political dissident and advocate of human rights battling political suppression, often accompanied by torture, by the former generals who had ruled South Korea beginning with Park Chung-Hee’s rise to power in 1961.

It was largely on the basis of his record as a populist leader with a strong regional backing that Kim won 40.3 percent of the votes as leader of his National Congress for New Politics, defeating Lee Hoi-Chang, leader of the ruling conservative Grand National Party, by a margin of 1.6 percent of the votes in the presidential election on 18 December 1997. Picking up 95 percent of the votes in his native southwestern Cholla region, as he had in his three previous runs at the presidency, Kim this time also counted on an opportunistic alliance with Kim Jong-Pil, a former prime minister, founder of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), and leader of his own small party, the United Liberal Democrats. A third factor was Rhee In-Je’s defection from Lee’s conservative party; Rhee was a former provincial governor who ran independently after losing the nomination to Lee and won 19.2 percent of the votes. Fourth, the economic crisis had forced South Korea to submit to a humiliating \$58 billion bailout put together by the International Monetary Fund two weeks before the election in return for promises of economic reform, and a significant number of voters perceived the need for change.

EARLY CAREER

Kim’s victory in 1997 as the first opposition candidate to win the presidency in South Korea capped off a political career that had begun in Mokpo, the port city in South Cholla Province thirty-five miles from Haeui Island where

he was born, according to an inscription near the family plot, on 6 January 1923. (Kim’s officially stated birthdate, 3 December 1925, is apparently based on when his birth was formally registered.) The offspring of a farming family, Kim attended high school in Mokpo but never went to college. Mystery surrounds his role in the Korean War, in which he said he served in a naval militia unit and operated a shipping company while living in the southeastern port of Pusan, not touched by the war. After the war he edited a local Mokpo newspaper and entered politics in a setting that would allow him to play upon a deep-seated yearning to escape from heavy-handed rule.

Kim owed his success in large measure to his messianic appeal in the Cholla region, including the independent city of Kwangju and North and South Cholla provinces, whose citizens always turned out in droves to vote for him. He emerged as the voice of the long pent-up sentiments of the Cholla people, oppressed by a succession of rulers going deep into Korea’s dynastic history and then by latter-day leaders with roots in the provinces to the east. Elected to the National Assembly in a bi-election in 1961 after two unsuccessful campaigns, Kim lost his seat after General Park staged a coup three days later on 16 May 1961 and dissolved the assembly. Elected again to the assembly in November 1963, Kim, as leader of the New Democratic Party, challenged Park in the 1971 presidential campaign. In the election on April 27, according to the National Election Commission, Park won 53.2 percent of the votes compared with 45.3 percent for Kim. Nearly four weeks later, on May 24, the day before National Assembly elections, Kim was severely injured in a highway collision with a truck that he claimed was an attempt to assassinate him and that left him with a chronic limp. Kim’s showing in the presidential election, and his party’s role as a strong minority voice in the assembly, inspired Park the next year to impose martial law and a new Yushin “revitalizing” constitution that deprived South Koreans of direct elections.

Kim’s defiance of Park made him a popular hero far beyond the Cholla region. From his home in Seoul’s Mapo

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district, he often criticized the government. On 8 August 1973 agents from the KCIA kidnapped him from his hotel in Tokyo while he was on a tour that was to take him to the United States for the purpose of raising funds and organizing international support. Drugging him and spiriting him into a waiting car, they drove him to a port and bundled him onto a boat. When he woke up, he discovered weights on his legs, presumably to sink him to the bottom of the sea. Kim said later he heard aircraft circling above, but he is believed to have confused the sounds of the ship's engines with those of a plane. The U.S. ambassador to Korea, Philip Habib, played a critical role in saving DJ by protesting to President Park. Five days later, Kim was dropped near his home, again free to give interviews to foreign journalists (although closely watched by KCIA agents outside). Nearly three years afterward, on 1 March 1976, the anniversary of the 1 March 1919 uprising against Japanese rule, he was arrested for signing a Declaration of Democratization and remained in prison until his release in 1978. Kim frequently acknowledged the role of U.S. diplomats, notably Donald Gregg, the Central Intelligence Agency station chief in Seoul, who later became ambassador to South Korea. Senior U.S. officials had become sensitive to human rights abuses during the eighteen-year rule of Park, whose suppression of opposition—notably that of Kim—had become a serious embarrassment and a focal point of opposition to the U.S.–South Korean alliance in both countries.

Although Kim was under house arrest, Chun Doo-Hwan, the general who had seized power after the assassination of Park on 26 October 1979 by the chief of the KCIA, had him imprisoned, tried, and sentenced to death following the Kwangju revolt of May 1980. Kim, charged with instigating the uprising in which soldiers killed approximately two hundred people, most of them students who had held the city for two weeks, was again rescued by the U.S. government. The United States persuaded Chun to commute Kim's death sentence in return for an invitation to become the first foreign head of state to call on President Ronald Reagan after Reagan's inauguration in January 1981.

Kim's sentence was reduced to twenty years in prison, and in December 1982 he was exiled to the United States, where he alternated between a fellowship at Harvard and his headquarters in a northern Virginia suburb before returning to Seoul, accompanied by American human rights activists and two members of the U.S. Congress, in a blaze of publicity on 8 February 1985. By that time the mood was changing. After enormous demonstrations

shook the capital, Chun was persuaded by his military ally General Roh Tae-Woo to agree in June 1987 to a "democracy constitution" and the first election under that constitution in December—a sequence of events that owed its success in part to encouragement by influential Americans both in and out of government. Roh won with 36.5 percent of the votes after Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung failed to agree on one of them as the single main opposition candidate. Kim Young-Sam got 28 percent of the votes, 1 percent more than Kim Dae-Jung. Five years later, in December 1992, Kim Young-Sam won 42 percent of the votes despite the inroads of the Hyundai founder Chung Ju-Yung, who got 16.3 percent of the votes. Kim Young-Sam became Korea's first civilian president in thirty-two years, while Kim Dae-Jung won 33.8 percent, slightly more than one-third of the votes despite his support from the Cholla region (National Election Commission).

THE PRESIDENCY

Kim Dae-Jung vowed after Kim Young-Sam's inauguration to forsake politics but decided on one final and successful try in 1997. He talked of "engagement" with North Korea during his campaign as part of a break with a legacy of dictatorship in which he had suffered. Kim's Sunshine policy represented a sharp shift from the tough line of his predecessors. North Korea's need for money prompted the opening of tours by the Hyundai Group to the Mount Kumgang region in late 1998 and suggested more possibilities for reconciliation. When the United States in 1998 sought Kim's support for inspection of a suspected underground nuclear site at Kumchangri, near North Korea's nuclear facilities at Yongbyon, Kim agreed on the need for access but said, "We lack conclusive evidence that the intended purpose [was nuclear related]." Kim made the remark at a press conference on 20 November 1998, and the U.S. envoy, Charles Kartman, repeated it the next day, as reported in the South Korean and foreign media.

Kim's Sunshine policy faced another challenge in a shootout on the Yellow Sea on 15 June 1999 in which South Korean ships sank a North Korean ship and heavily damaged another, killing an estimated forty North Korean sailors. The North Korean vessels retreated from south of the Northern Limit Line, a marker the North refused to recognize, but Kim the next day defended his "policy of warm partnership" as the way to bring about "peace on the Korean peninsula." Kim made this remark at the opening ceremony of a session of the International Olympic

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Committee, reported in the *International Herald Tribune* on 17 June 1999.

Kim's Sunshine policy reached its zenith in June 2000 at the inter-Korean summit in Pyongyang. Kim's primary adviser Lim Dong-Won, director of the National Intelligence Service and former unification minister, engineered the historic meeting between Kim and the North Korean leader Kim Jong-Il after the Hyundai founder Chung and his fifth son Chung Mong-Hun, negotiating for trade and investment, returned from Pyongyang in December 1998 with word of North Korea's interest in a summit. On 9 March 2000 Kim Dae-Jung enunciated his "Berlin Declaration" at the Free University of Berlin, announcing, "We are willing to provide the infrastructure" needed to jumpstart the North's collapsed economy (Kim, Address). The government's culture minister Park Jie-Won flew to Beijing on 17 March 2000 to work out details. He and Lim's trusted aide Kim Bo-Hyun met North Korean officials in Singapore, as later reported by the *International Herald Tribune*, to arrange a secret payment to Kim Jong-Il.

On 13 June 2000 Kim Dae-Jung flew to Pyongyang on the first flight from Seoul to Pyongyang since the Korean War. Kim Jong-Il greeted him at the airport, and crowds cheered as they drove into the city. The next day they held their first summit meeting, and on 15 June they pledged "to solve the question of the country's reunification independently by the concerted efforts of the Korean nation responsible for it." This was according to the official text of the five-point North-South Joint Declaration, 15 June 2000. The declaration also pledged to work for "reunification" and resolve "humanitarian issues," including organizing reunions of millions of families divided by the Korean War as well as return of political prisoners. Koreans in both the North and the South witnessed scenes on television of Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jong-Il shaking hands and exchanging pleasantries. They did not, however, address the issue of manufacture and export of missiles capable of delivering weapons of mass destruction, and there was no mention of human rights.

Kim Dae-Jung returned by road, symbolic of the possibilities of opening the border at the truce village of Panmunjom to regular traffic, but the optimism of the summit soon faded. "The agreement was short on concrete detail," said Han Sung-Joo, foreign minister in 1994, when the United States and North Korea negotiated the Geneva framework agreement under which North Korea had stopped producing nuclear warheads at Yongbyon in return for the promise of twin nuclear reactors to meet

energy needs. "We should think of it as a start rather than a finished product," said Han in an interview published in the *International Herald Tribune* on 16 June 2000.

Awarded the 2000 Nobel Peace Prize after years of privately lobbying for it, Kim Dae-Jung, accepting the accolade in Oslo on 10 December 2000, said that "Chairman Kim," whose title derived from his chairmanship of North Korea's National Defense Commission, had "succeeded in bridging the unification formulas" by proposing a pre-unification system of "one people, two systems and two independent governments." He said Kim Jong-Il had "concurred that the U.S. military presence on the Korean peninsula should continue for stability on the peninsula and Northeast Asia" (Kim, Nobel Lecture). There was, however, no confirmation from Pyongyang, which continued to demand withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Korea.

Absent from Kim Dae-Jung's remarks in Oslo was any allusion to human rights abuses in North Korea, despite the fact that he had made human rights for South Koreans, notably those from Cholla, a centerpiece of his career. Kim, in an interview on 5 January 2001 with the *International Herald Tribune*, said that he believed it necessary to build good relations with North Korea before pressing on human rights. The danger, he feared, was that this sensitive topic would derail reconciliation.

Critics berated Kim Dae-Jung in the run-up to the announcement of the Nobel Peace Prize for having returned sixty-three former prisoners, some of them imprisoned for years on espionage charges, in September 2000 while failing to demand the return of approximately one thousand South Koreans held in the North, including prisoners from the Korean War and fishermen captured by North Korean patrol boats. Aides of the president, however, believed the prize would help counter domestic criticism. Since the promulgation of the democracy constitution in 1987, abuse and torture of prisoners had largely ended, hundreds of political prisoners had been freed, and arrests under the National Security Law had fallen sharply, even though the law remained in effect.

Nonetheless fulfillment of the promises made in Pyongyang was slow. Inter-Korean family visits were limited in number and length and tightly monitored. All the North Koreans who went to the South in the first few visits were party hacks who had gone to the North during the Korean War, some under duress, some of their own volition. All the North Koreans whom South Koreans traveling in the North visited in Pyongyang were tutored to praise life under Kim Jong-Il. North Korea soon stopped reunions in South Korea, demanding that all be

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held in the tourist area at the base of Mount Kumgang, a complex of several thousand granitic spire-like peaks looming beyond the eastern end of the demilitarized zone that has divided the Korean peninsula since the end of the Korean War. The purpose was to ensure that North Koreans could not return with tales of the wonders of Seoul. There would be no mail, no phone calls, no e-mail, and no normal means of communication.

Finally, the *International Herald Tribune* on 31 January 2001 revealed the transfer of several hundred million dollars needed to persuade Kim Jong-Il to agree to a summit. "Although the payoff remains unconfirmed," said the article, "it was believed that it was necessary in a society where bribery, often in the guise of gift-giving, is a longstanding tradition in both Koreas" (Kirk, "The South Korean Spy Chief").

Still, Kim Dae-Jung's Sunshine policy had the enthusiastic support of President Bill Clinton, whose secretary of state Madeleine Albright visited Pyongyang in October 2000. When Kim called on Clinton's successor George W. Bush in March 2001, however, Bush expressed "skepticism" about Kim Jong-Il. Why make a deal with the North Korean leader, Bush asked, if there was a problem with "verification" of any agreement on producing, testing, and exporting missiles? Bush reinforced this view in his State of the Union address in January 2002, when he included North Korea in an "axis of evil" along with Iran and Iraq.

Kim Dae-Jung waited in vain for Kim Jong-Il to pay a return visit to Seoul. Kim Dae-Jung did manage to persuade leaders in Washington, D.C., to soften their tone until the revelation in October 2002 of North Korea's program for developing warheads from highly enriched uranium detonated the 1994 Geneva framework agreement. During the campaign in the fall of 2002 for a successor to Kim Dae-Jung, the *International Herald Tribune's* report on the payment for the June 2000 summit was confirmed. Lim Dong-Won acknowledged that the National Intelligence Service had helped Hyundai Merchant Marine exchange Korean currency for \$200 million and said Hyundai officials had told him that Hyundai had agreed to give North Korea \$500 million, ostensibly for exclusive rights for economic projects. Chung Mong-Hun, chairman of Hyundai Asan and responsible for Hyundai's dealings with the North, cooperated in the plot. Park, Lim, and Chung were indicted. Chung on 4 August 2003 jumped to his death from his office in Hyundai headquarters.

The final years of Kim's presidency were also marred by charges of corruption against his three sons, two by his first wife, Cha Yong-Ae, who died in 1960, and the youngest by his second wife, Lee Hee-Ho, a well-educated, devout Methodist whom he married in 1962 and who advised and helped him for the rest of his career. With all three sons tried and convicted, Kim, who had become a Catholic in 1957, promised to close his Foundation for Peace in the Asia-Pacific Region, a conduit for donations; the foundation when he stepped down as president in February 2003 became his library. He clung to the dream of another meeting with Kim Jong-Il and had hoped to cross the demilitarized zone on the newly built railroad to Kaesong. Negotiations broke down on opening the railroad, however, and Kim Dae-Jung had to postpone the visit amid the furor caused by the threat of North Korea's long-range missile, test-fired for a second time on 5 July 2006, followed by North Korea's first test of a nuclear device, exploded underground on 9 October 2006. Nonetheless his Sunshine policy glimmered as an elusive holy grail, the goal that endured as his gift to posterity.

[See also *North Korea and South Korea*.]

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