Civil Society and Nonviolence in Korea

BY JYAHYUN LEE

There has been no Martin Luther Kim. There has been no Mahatma Lee. In South Korea, a central figure or symbol of nonviolence has never existed. The government had ‘invented’ and ‘reconstructed’ some historical figures as patriots such as Admiral Lee in order to promote nationalism, but an equivalent leader of nonviolence has never emerged.

Yet we find numerous examples of nonviolent movements in Korean History. The great Sam-Il movement of 1919 during Japanese colonial rule was one of the largest nonviolent demonstrations in the twentieth century. Korea had been under brutal and cruel Japanese colonial rule since 1910 and leaders of the independence movement engaged in various actions to liberate Korea. It was at the peak of oppression when Woodrow Wilson declared what are known as the “Fourteen Points” in 1918, which outlined national “self-determination.” Affected by this idea, Korean students in Tokyo declared their demand for Korean independence. In response, the underground nationalist leaders in Korea decided it was time to act. Organized largely by religious leaders—of Christian, Buddhist, and Cheondogyo (a distinct religion in Korea) leadership—secret plans to hold demonstrations were disseminated throughout towns and villages.

At 2 pm on March 1st of 1919, 33 nationalist leaders gathered at Taehwagwan Restaurant in Seoul and read out the Korean Declaration of Independence. The same thing happened in other appointed sites throughout Korea at the same time. Masses assembled and started peaceful demonstrations, shouting out “Daehan-minkuk-manse (Long-live Korean Independence).” It has been estimated that more than one million Korean citizens poured out onto the streets to nonviolently protest against Japanese colonial rule. Japanese colonialists responded by sending a police force that attacked, beat, and even shot peaceful demonstrators. Sources count that 7,500 Korean demonstrators were killed and 45,000 arrested. There were sequential demonstrations throughout Korea for about one year and approximately two million Korean people participated in 1,500 demonstrations.

Although the March 1st movement did not succeed in liberating Korea from Japanese rule – in fact, Japanese rule became even harsher in terms of cultural dominance by forcing Koreans to speak the Japanese language – the campaign became a model for other Asian nations’ freedom struggles. It also set the stage for future Korean struggles, and March 1st is still celebrated as a national holiday.

Korea’s next major nonviolent movement took place in the 1960s, when unarmed students rose up to overthrow the authoritarian regime of Rhee Sung Man. The opposition parties organized thousands of demonstrations that included students and intellectuals, who faced beatings, tear gas, and torture.

In 1987, the biggest struggle for democracy in Korea overthrew the authoritarian regime of Chun Du Hwan. Not long after college student Park Jong Chul was tortured and killed by the police, students started engaging in massive street protests. These protests reached a peak on June 26, culminating in the “Great Peace March of the People.” Countless demonstrators, including students, white-collar workers, and the middle class, literally packed the streets around Seoul and other urban centers in Korea. The human waves of demonstrators were so overwhelming that the police were running out of tear gas canisters. These demonstrations finally resulted in the June 29 Declaration, which ended military rule. According to the “encyclopedia of nonviolent action,” the success was made possible by use of violent tactics by the radical front on the one hand and extensive utilization of nonviolent tactics by many students, intellectuals, and members of the middle class on the other hand. (Scholars disagree on whether nonviolent and violent action can effectively complement each other. Certain political science professors believe that violent tactics can be helpful when used on the periphery in complement to nonviolent tactics. However, Prof. Michael Nagler and other peace studies experts say that violence will always contaminate and undermine a movement in the long run and that any substantive achievement of such a movement occurs despite the unhelpful violent components.)

This was the beginning of one of the most successful stories of democratization among developing countries in the 20th century. What is even more important is that this was also a significant period for civil society and nonviolence in Korea.

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