

**On Social Mobility, the Military, and Democratization:
Contrasting Evolutions in Korea and Burma.
Notes for a Preliminary Inquiry**

By David I. Steinberg

[Editor's Note: Dr. Steinberg submitted an earlier version of this paper as part of a briefing at the State Department in 2004]

Although we focus on the word 'democracy' as an element of U.S. policy, we should rather focus on the term 'democratization,' for this inherently includes the concept of process, while democracy is more like a finished or completed product, ignoring the tortuous path leading to that goal. A U.S. official at a conference not long ago ran down the list of recent elections in Asia, indicating that this demonstrated that democracy was spreading. That was a half-truth, because an election alone does not a democracy make. It is the process of building attitudes, institutions, and procedures that is the critical element in such change, which, without extensive previous experience, is likely to be hollow or short-lived. One of the problems in dealing with Burma, for example, is such a concentration on one election—May 1990-- no matter how sweeping the victory was. Whether honoring that election should be the goal of U.S. policy should be subject to dialogue and debate, but even if it were honored, imbedding democracy in that society would still have to be achieved.

One key component of the coercive authority structure in both Burma/Myanmar and North Korea is the role of the military—pervasive in Burma and enmeshed with the Korean Workers Party in North Korea. One of the elements of the democratization process in most societies is the diminution of the role of the military in active administration and governance. When they have held power, how can they be convinced to relinquish authority? Aside from the issue of indemnity against charges of previous abuses/crimes, which at least in Burma is a major issue, how can this transition be achieved and how can the military be convinced that such a profound change is not a transitory phenomenon?

This raises the issue of how opportunities for democracy come about. Do autocrats and/or the military voluntarily give up power? Is there an evolution of plural authority over time?

Does it occur suddenly through revolution or external pressures—military, economic, diplomatic? Such factors will effect both how society views such changes and how it may react to foreign proffered advice or assistance. The Philippines changed through an essentially bloodless ‘people power’ revolution in 1986. South Korea changed through massive demonstrations, together with U.S. pressures, creating an evolutionary process in 1987, and had previously changed through a violent student revolution in April 1960. The typology of change will affect the result and the consequent institutionalization of power.

Whatever the process of change from autocratic rule to more pluralistic governance, one aspect of such an evolution is the development of avenues of social mobility that allow for, and promote, the perception of societal change. Many have claimed that the development of a middle class has been a causal phenomenon in the growth of democratic processes in a variety of states, although it could equally be argued that it may be a parallel characteristic. Although a middle class is by definition a matter of economic status, it also has an attitudinal characteristic—that one has hope that one’s children will have better lives and that progress and change is possible. Such class changes are, of course, one element of the mobility process, but in concentrating on the economic aspects of the growth of a middle class, which is usually associated with the development of a vigorous private sector, one sometimes may ignore a broader phenomenon on which I wish to concentrate below.

Aspects of social mobility and the changes in both Burma/Myanmar and Korea (in this instance one is referring to the Republic of Korea) offer instructive suggestions that may be important to understanding the role of the military in society, their potential removal from direct administrative power, and in furthering the democratization process. Burma moved from an wide avenue of social mobility under a civilian government in 1960, including through the military channel, to a restricted form of mobility either through or controlled by the military. South Korea in the same period evolved from traditional restricted mobility, but one open through the military, to a broadly based set of mobility avenues. North Korea, prior to 1960, had overturned societal authority, and that restricted avenue of party/military dominance that essentially existed since the formation of the state in 1948 remained constant.

What this may imply is that for democratization to take place in either Burma or North Korea, and be institutionalized or deepened, avenues of social mobility may need to become available to provide alternatives to the military’s political control. To enable the military to

relinquish power may require alternative sources of social mobility for them (and others as well). It may be instructive to consider the changes that have taken place in these three societies.

Burma/Myanmar

Burma before the coup of 1962 was a society characterized by wide open avenues of mobility for both the Burman majority and minorities as long as these other groups played by Burman rules.¹ The Burman area may be the only significant colonial arena in Asia where the traditional pre-colonial elites did not re-emerge to some degree on independence.² Widespread mobility after independence existed through four channels:

[1] The military, which was a proud career and a highly desirable one because of its role in the independence movement. There were, in this period, more recruits than positions. It was a volunteer force and was open at virtually all levels to minority groups.³ A universal draft (male-female on an Israeli model) was enacted in 1959 and never instituted.

[2] The *sangha* (Buddhist monkhood), which offered education from primary school through university and from which any monk might leave at any time without stigma and with great social prestige. Village education traditionally was in the hands of the *sangha*, and monks continue to wield extensive influence today.

[3] Education, which was free, and the two universities (Rangoon and Mandalay) were filled with many from poor rural areas and diverse ethnicities.

[4] Politically oriented mass organizations (workers, peasants, etc.), and civil society groups, where an uneducated but charismatic person could rise to considerable power.

One should note that private sector has been omitted in this mobility equation. Most private sector activities beyond those in the bazaar, even after independence, were heavily controlled by Chinese, Sino-Burman, and Indian minorities, often through Burman front men. After 1963 and the introduction of a rigid form of socialism, the private sector ceased to be even a most modest source of mobility. There were of course Burmese professionals (doctors, lawyers, bureaucrats, etc.) who rose through the educational system. An important element of these avenues was that there were opportunities for those in remote rural areas to advance in the society.

Following the coup of 1962, these avenues were conflated into a military channel. The *sangha* was registered and its activities circumscribed, education was under the strict control of the military, mass organizations were proscribed except as they were part of the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP), and civil society of any significance and influence either coopted or eliminated. Since 1988, little has changed under the military State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) and its next incarnation, the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) (both completely composed of military personnel) except that the private sector has been encouraged and the BSPP is gone. But military control remains rigid and pervasive. The military has carefully monitored the private sector both through direct investment and intervention as well as through influence on the formal credit mechanisms and regulations, and recruitment into the civil service at national and local levels is under military domination. Minority mobility is diminished even through the military channel; Burmans are in command and Buddhists are preferred, often mandated. Civil society of any national or regional influence is neither alive nor well but is parastatal or closely monitored.⁴

It is not too farfetched to claim that there is no social mobility in Burmese society today except through authorized channels controlled by the military, and all are subservient to that of the military itself, which has expanded from about 110,000 in the 1960 period to about 450,000 in 2004.

South Korea

To many South Koreans, even as early as 1960, South Korea was regarded as having been opened and offering remarkable mobility. This has been claimed because of the legal (if not social) elimination of the *yanban* (gentry) class, the Japanese occupation, The American military government, the Korean War and its dislocation and destruction of assets, and the shared poverty that prevailed at that time. These are accurate assessments when viewed internally, but in comparative perspective Korea remained a hierarchically oriented society, where the social status of the former *yangban* families remained high, where education was limited for most to primary school (there were only 100,000 students in tertiary education in 1961—there are over 3 million in 2003 and the number of colleges and universities has exploded exponentially⁵), where blue collar skills were lacking except those trained through the universal male military draft, and where access to formal capital and the private sector was severely restricted.⁶ The military did offer an

alternative, perhaps the only one for the rural poor bright male. Because of poor transportation (even bicycles were relatively rare), villagers could not go to middle or high schools, which were located in the market towns. But such males were drafted and could rise through military channels and the brightest receive a college degree. The rank and file had, on discharge from the military, often acquired blue collar skills (electronics, mechanics, drivers, etc.) at a period when such training in academic settings was minimal.⁷ Although the military before the coup of 1961 was not considered a highly prestigious career in Confucian terms, after the coup it became a desirable avenue of advancement.

Since that time, the private sector has mushroomed, expanded educational opportunities and vastly improved transportation networks have enabled children, even from remote areas, to attend high school and local colleges, and the society has become more egalitarian in terms of opportunity if not in bureaucratic hierarchical structures. So the military has receded in terms of the choicest career path. Although government service and academia are still highly regarded as at the upper ends of the mobility channel, the private sector has become the single most important avenue of mobility.

Some have claimed that beginning in the mid-1990s, and exacerbated by the financial crisis of 1997, mobility in Korean society has been importantly reduced. There is no question but that income distribution has worsened, with disparities growing to a degree causing political concerns (the rise of the Democratic Labor Party, which received 13 percent of the vote in the April 2004 elections, is one such indication).

North Korea

Following the establishment of North Korea in 1948, a rigid system was imposed based on class and family background. Workers and peasants were elevated and the gentry, wealthy, and Christians were purged or migrated south. The nexus between the party and the military remains strong, and there are no avenues for mobility except those under rigid state control.

Conclusions

Perhaps one reason for the departure of the military from political control in South Korea without incident, in what was a major accomplishment little researched but one perhaps unparalleled worldwide, has been the formation of avenues of social mobility that allowed the

military to retain high positions in the society through other channels, and that also enabled their children to prosper. A similar pattern has been emerging in Thailand, where the military have retained power through migration into legislative positions. Thailand also has exhibited a marked expansion of the military into business and the private sector.

The South Korean government, even under autocratic regimes, was quite astute in dealing with the military. Park Chung Hee needed to provide internal mobility within the military to keep junior officers from forming coup groups, so retirements were rigidly enforced and alternative employments found for those leaving (diplomatic posts, state enterprises, advisory positions, etc.). Even under democratic administrations, since the military officers generally married late and had children in college at retirement age, the government recognized that they needed assistance; 'research grants' and other means were found to help them in their retirement years. Although there were rumors that if Kim Dae Jung had won the presidency in 1987 following political liberalization, the military might have launched a coup (he lost to Roh Tae Woo, a former general, because of a split in the civilian opposition) as many regarded Kim as a 'dangerous radical' too close to North Korea. When Kim Dae Jung was later elected, there was no murmur from the barracks.

If Burma or North Korea were to 'democratize,' whatever we may mean by that term, or if in the first instance the military were to give up political control, then there must be alternative patterns of social and economic advancement for their key personnel and for others who aspire to leadership. The simple holding of an election, however free and fair, will neither institute democracy nor guarantee its continuity. Although there are other critical elements to the evolution of the democratic process, social mobility seems one that should be understood in calculating the complex equation of political change, and encouraging the movement of the military back to the barracks.

When we consider the massive size of the North Korean military, and even the Burmese military is the second largest army in Southeast Asia after Vietnam (which is reducing a major portion of its soldiers), an effective means to must be found to provide alternative employment if a significant number of troops are to be demobilized, and their families provided for. Vietnam has encouraged the military to engage in economic enterprises that are used to provide work and extra income for their dependents. The Burmese military, through their conglomerates (the Myanmar Economic Holding Corporation, and the Myanmar Economic Corporation, both of

which are registered as separate from the public sector-state economic enterprises) already employ hundreds of thousands of civilian workers. If the United States is effectively to assist in the process of demobilization of large military forces in any country, it should be prepared to modify its rigid ideological avoidance of state sector activities, which could prove important in absorbing surplus personnel. If the primary U.S. objective is ‘democracy,’ then economic ideology needs to be subordinate to the goal of finding economic activities for the military for some transitional period.

Endnotes

¹ Two-thirds of the population are Burmans, almost all of whom are Buddhists. One-third of the 50 million population is composed of a variety of minorities (e.g., Shan, Karn, Kachin, Chin, Mon, etc.) of all religions and internal social systems, some rather egalitarian and some with strong traditionalist feudal tendencies and institutions that have been legally eliminated although social attitudes have changed more slowly.

² The last Burmese monarch was exiled to India in 1886, and the families associated with the monarchy never gained the status that they had in other societies after colonial rule.

³ On independence in 1948, the army chief-of-staff was a Karen, General Smith Dun, who was replaced by Ne Win (a Burman) in 1949 with the Karen insurrection, even though General Smith Dun was loyal to the Rangoon government.

⁴ Some scholars claim that at the neighborhood level civil society groups still function. Although the *sangha* hierarchy is controlled, the village monastery is autonomous. There are a few apolitical indigenous NGOs, but their influence is limited.

⁵ South Korea is said to have the highest percentage of the age cohort in college of any country in the world except the United States.

⁶ The curb, or informal, market for capital had interest rates three to four times the government rates, making competition with state-authorized institutions virtually impossible.

⁷ One could cogently argue that the development of Korea in its labor-intensive, early phase was to a significant degree due to the skills that the workers had developed through their military experience.