Report from Korea

Ben Johnson

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The cars, cabs, trucks, and buses of Seoul constitute the worst traffic I've ever seen. I didn't dare jay-walk during the entire week I was there. Students know how to stop traffic though: just use, or threaten to use, Molotovs.

In late October, about two dozen delegates arrived from almost as many countries in North America, Europe, Australia, and elsewhere to attend the first International Seminar for World Peace sponsored by the Federation of Anarchists in Korea (FAK). Rather than trying to recover from severe jet-lag on our first full day in Seoul, a handful of us said to ourselves: "Hey let's go to a university and meet some student radicals!" While some might have argued this to be a needlein-a-haystack situation, given Seoul's population of around nine million, we figured that at least it was a good opportunity to see more of the city and less of the hotel we were collectively booked into.

After a couple of hours as the only round-eyes wandering around Dongguk University—a small campus compared to the other fourteen in Seoul—we were treated to our first glimpse of rousing anti-government activity when a group of about 40 students came marching and chanting down a steep road.

The marchers included drummers and a few young Buddhist monks shouting slogans, waving fists, and showing no signs of the hesitancy of novices. Over the course of the afternoon we realized that the majority knew the political chants, songs, and rhythms at least as well as their Western counterparts knew rock music. Yet as much as this bore some resemblance to the mindless antics of Marxist-Leninists in North America, there was far less of the sightless eyes and robotic movements I've come to associate with that authoritarian tendency.

Over the course of the next two hours, this group and several others like it converged on a stage set up at one end of a square that appeared to be a focal point of the campus. Banners and posters adorned the stage and one decoration stood out starkly to us: a bright red, reversed, untilted swastika. We wasted little time in discovering that it was a common, sacred symbol of Buddhism. A large, full-colour painting hung next to the stage; it wove traditional images of peasants and workers into an apparent theme of reunification.

Along with other students arriving in small, less formal groups, they sat through continuous speeches, mostly by men older than themselves, and many of these wearing grey Buddhist robes. Now and again the most attentive part of the crowd, sitting closest to the stage, would erupt in chanting and fist-waving, again accompanied by a loud, almost irritable, percussion. We were struck by the patience of those who sat through the rally for two hours, but we would later see how they were to make up for this lack of action.

"Speak Marxist, Please"

For most of this time we sat a little distance from the gathering around the stage, chatting with a student in very slow English. While he wasn't interested in taking part in the demonstration, he did want to engage us in a political discussion. His explanation that the event was a protest against the military government's repression of Buddhism was soon verified by the sight of the crowd (now numbering several hundred) standing up, turning around, and praying—quite reverently it appeared—to a Buddha-like statue in the middle of the square.

Our companion eventually admitted that he was part of a marxist study group. Oh, we know all about Marx, we explained, with a collective irony that probably went right by him.

"We're anarchists. Do you know what anarchism is?" His reply, when the facts sunk in, was an embarrassed chuckle: "I know all about anarchism. I don't like anarchism." There followed the typical rejoinders about anarchism and order, until he changed the subject: "Have you read Kim Il-Sung? His works are banned in South Korea. We cannot get them." We expressed our disdain for censorship, but also informed him he wasn't missing much.

Nearly ready to leave, I wandered to a part of the square I had not reached before. I was momentarily distracted by the realization that some of the young Buddhist monks in the crowd were in fact women. This startled me not only because I wasn't expecting it but also because, given the shaved heads and formless robes, I couldn't figure out exactly what gender characteristic I was perceiving. The women certainly had no less severe and serious looks on their faces than did the men.

The trip to the other end of the square immediately changed my mind about the nature of the demonstration. I saw some students beginning to put on masks; beside them were two effigies just begging to be burned; and beside the effigies were stacks of cardboard cases containing hundreds of gasoline bombs. These latter consisted of beer and pop bottles, about one-quarter filled with gasoline and with a fabric wick neatly balled up inside the bottle and extending out the neck. I was about to take some photographs of this collection and its masked attendants when someone's firm but amiable motions clearly warned me against it.

Things Get Hot

Shortly after this, the crowd rose and marched with considerable noise along the path leaving the university. A number of bystanders who had shown little interest in the speeches now joined and jammed the steep, paved roadway at the entrance. Some of us climbed on to the roof of a student residence that overlooked the entrance and the eight-lane-wide city street curving up a hill just outside it. By this point at least a thousand people had gathered, but so too had the cops.

The riot police, in helmets and equipped with shields and sticks, had already blocked off traffic at the top and at the bottom of the hill, creating a war-zone of about a quarter mile. By the time we got to suitable lookout positions, the effigies had been burned and a hundred or so students had begun attacking the police with Molotovs.

Most of the action was taking place at the top of the hill, where students had lit a bonfire in the middle of the street and were grouped around it. Mostly masked, they would light their Molotovs in the fire and advance towards the cops swinging them in circles at their sides, then lobbing them among the cops who stubbornly resisted advancing or retreating.

The students (all males) moved forward and fell back in waves. Sometimes other students would immediately replace them in the attack; sometimes there would be a lull when nothing would happen. Throughout all maneouvres, a rhythm section danced and beat on drums, usually keeping a position just at the rear of the main action. Now and again the six of them, men and women dressed in white, would snake with dancing steps in, among, and around those on the street but always out of stone-throwing distance from the cops. Tuned into the action of the street, this percussion had an entirely different flavour than that of the slogan-shouting during the speeches: as a wave of people moved forward to hurl their Molotovs or fist-sized stones, the beat would quicken; between the forays at the front, the percussion would be steady, not letting anyone's pulse slow down.

What effect this had on the police, I'd dearly like to know; the only movements I could discern among them were a short retreat once (they recovered the ground shortly after) and a greater use of shields against stones than against the Molotovs. Since none of them caught on fire despite their proximity to flames that would sometimes leap four or five feet above a gasoline puddle on the street, I assumed that they wore fire-resistant clothing. However, when stones were hurled at them they would duck or carefully use their shields.

Presumably the students intended to march unencumbered through the streets of the city, and the cops intended to confine the students more or less to the university campus. The police rarely enter the campus itself, we were told.

Is This a Rehearsal or Is This Real?

Yet the entire event appeared somewhat orchestrated, as if all but a few details were predicted by the organizers. Cases of Molotovs were carried to the "front" at regular intervals, as were bushels of stones (curiously, the Molotovs were usually carried by men and the stones by women). No one seemed in any panic. A number of people lining the walkway leading to the street and standing on the edge of roofs overlooking the battle held Molotovs or stones but showed no sign of advancing. Our guess was that they constituted a covering fire-power in the event that the cops changed their minds about merely standing their ground and chased the front lines of the militants back onto campus.

Indeed, a large number of pedestrians, obviously people having nothing to do with the university, gathered to watch. Some were shoppers, some were children. At one point a well-dressed woman crossed the street just behind the last ranks of the fighting students. She couldn't have considered herself at all endangered, as she would have gotten nowhere fast in her high-heels had the cops charged at that moment.

In fact the spectacular nature of the event fascinated me for a short while: the lit Molotovs tracing circles of fire as students rotated their arms before lobbing the bottles in high arcs towards the grey-suited police. Sometimes the small flame would briefly disappear in the midst of the cops and then a bright blaze shadowed by black smoke would suddenly flare up. It felt like a combination of sports and display, like fireworks integrated into a football game.

Throughout all this, I saw no injuries other than those of about three young men who had apparently been hit by cops throwing the rocks back at students. Two of these people had bleeding cuts and the other was limping.

When the Molotovs ran out, a final indication of orchestration began. It consisted of tight ranks of students, almost entirely women (including some in Buddhist robes), who marched not exactly in step but at least with perfect synchronization of waved fists and chanted slogans. They marched down to the street, shaking their fists in what appeared to be a kind of ritual, as if to say "we're leaving, but you're not driving us away." They then returned to some place on campus. Some students followed them to hear more speeches; most people seemed to be wandering off home.

I turned to a fellow-spectator, a Korean man in a suit and tie and with a brief case, who asked me in hesitant English if I was American. I shook my head—"Ben Johnson," I replied. "Ah, Canada!" he says, grinning. I asked him if he worked at the university. To my surprise, he answered no, he was a businessman. So what did he think about the students demonstrating? "It is very good that the students protest the immoral government," was his reply, emphasizing the word "immoral".

What's the Politics Behind the Scenes?

Within a few days, we had interviewed a number of student activists. For the most part, their political perspective is confined to anti-Imperialism (mostly the U.S. was mentioned, seldom Japan), reunification of the two Koreas, exposing the corruption and repression of the military government, and stating that "the university has problems." The nationalism-reunification position, especially, has a broad-based appeal. From the 14th century through World War Two the Koreans were directly ruled by foreign imperial powers (Japan and China), and since the war borders have divided families and spheres of influence between the dominant eastern and western powers. Even the Korean Anarchist Federation sees reunification and the removal of imperial influences as their most important goals.

The English of interviewees or of the translators was rarely extensive and this might partially explain why we had considerable difficulty discussing other political concepts, but we also detected that the general perspective of the students was either Marxist-Leninist—especially among the leadership—or else spontaneously combative, fighting the targets that were easy to see.

Of those we interviewed who seemed to represent the leadership, no one was interested in discussing a critique of work, industry, or the environment. They would not speculate on the nature of a re-unified Korean society or of its government; "that's too far in the future" to predict, they would say. In the meantime, their tactical demand

called for greater co-operation between the two countries. Just the same, it's likely that at least the leadership of the student movement is soft on Kim Il-Sung. One of our hosts from the conference was among our best informants, in that his English was very good, he was of an age that had allowed him to view at least two generations of student unrest in both the West and the East, and he also shared our anti-authoritarian perspective. He stated that it was clear to him that most of the student leadership had substantial links to North Korea, perhaps even to the point of receiving money. However, he emphasized, no one had produced concrete proof to this effect, despite the fact that the newspapers would love to have some.

He also expressed the opinion that the actions of most students were based more in the field of ideas than in a gut-level appreciation of social hardship. Virtually all university students come from homes that have not known physical hardship in their lifetimes. Even our friend, whose age was probably in the vicinity of 40, had only gained a sense of what Korea had been like through the still-agonizing memories of his parents and grandparents. More often than not, he indicated, radical students have gone on to complete absorption by their jobs and careers. This helps explain the attitude of the businessman-spectator I had met.

The average work-week in Korea gobbles up 57 hours of a person's time. Seoul is a petty-bourgeois paradise, packed with small shops which are in turn jammed with commodities of all kinds. It is a place where the expectations of millions of people have been shaped to fit a society of mass production. Given the influx of Japanese and American capital and the destitute condition of Korea after World War Two, inflating these expectations and tantalizing Koreans with the crumbs and leftovers of production for the First World has been a fairly easy process.

Between the current political unrest in Korea and the activism in the West in the late sixties, one can see a partial relationship: rising expectations within affluence contrasted starkly to a state authority immersed in military matters. Young Koreans avoid military service only with great difficulty.

Yet one major factor in the comparison appeared nowhere to us: a cultural or lifestyle critique. Everywhere styles were fashionable and appearances conformist. The Buddhism seemed too conservative to be a positive spiritual force, and a sizeable portion of the population is Christian (Korea is, after all, the home of Reverend Moon; he was busy marrying 6500 couples that weekend). We saw no evidence of drugs anywhere. Women, despite their evident numbers, played minor or cheer-leading roles in all the political activity we saw.

The lack of a personal dimension and a communal dynamic (in the sense of an opposition to the commodity-centred nature of Korean society) goes a long way to explain the uncritical attitude toward authoritarianism and the reduction of most revolutionary ideas to questions of political economy among Korean students. Thus it wouldn't be surprising to see the Korean student movement deflected more completely into the kind of nationalism so familiar in developing countries, one driven more by ambition for professional or political careers than by a desire for radical social change. It might be easily stalled as visible targets such as corrupt politicians leave the scene or as the movement itself runs out of spontaneity. Given that the latter element is certainly the most exciting characteristic of the current movement, its loss would also be the most tragic.

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