

SELECTIONS FROM TO BUILD A NATION (1971)
By Pak Chŏnghŭi

Introduction

The Syngman Rhee (Yi Seungman, 1875-1965) government in South Korea, which had come to power in the late 1940s, was overthrown by a spring 1960 revolution led largely by students, who protested its corruption. Then, in May 1961, there was a second, military, coup, which brought to power General Pak Chŏnghŭi (Park Chung-Hee, 1917-1979), who ruled until his death (by assassination) in 1979. Park's years in power were marked by both rapid economic development and authoritarian government under which civil rights were repeatedly suspended. In this passage from his 1971 book *To Build a Nation*, Park reflected back on the early 1960s.

Document Excerpts with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

From *Sources of Korean Tradition*, edited by Yŏng-ho Ch'oe, Peter H. Lee, and Wm. Theodore de Bary, vol. 2 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 396-398. © 2000 Columbia University Press. Reproduced with the permission of the publisher. All rights reserved.

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When I took over power as the leader of the revolutionary group on 16 May, 1961, I felt, honestly speaking, as if I had been given a pilfered household or a bankrupt firm to manage. ...

But I had to rise above this pessimism to rehabilitate the household. I had to break, once and for all, the vicious circle of poverty and economic stagnation. ...

Question:

1. What does Pak Chŏnghŭi suggest were the reasons for the military coup of May 16, 1961?

Longer Selection with Questions

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Before May 16 the Korean economy was in disorder. Accumulated political blunders and misguided economic policy had utterly disarranged it. The postwar rehabilitation of the nation was at a near-standstill, while the amount of grant-type foreign aid was lessening. Economic stagnation aggravated poverty and unemployment. Farmers' debts rose sharply ... With growth at a standstill at the turn of the 1960s, Korea found itself one of the lowest income countries in the world. The industrial structure was not solid. Due to a huge gravitation toward them of a huge amount of foreign aid, the secondary and tertiary industries seemed excessively swollen in comparison with primary industry. ...

...

The institutional and moral aspects of the society were no better. People fatalistically took poverty and reliance on foreign aid as unavoidable facts of life. Businessmen and industrialists failed to fulfill their important role in economic development. Many corrupt government officials and parvenus worked together to amass illegal fortunes. The market, suffering from its small scale and lack of vigorous competition, did not function normally. The underdeveloped agricultural system was unable to meet the demand for food — we were forced to rely on the farm products of advanced countries. The whole economy was afflicted by inexperience, inefficiency, and wasteful management.

When I took over power as the leader of the revolutionary group on 16 May 1961, I felt, honestly speaking, as if I had been given a pilfered household or a bankrupt firm to manage. Around me I could find little hope or encouragement. The outlook was bleak.

But I had to rise above this pessimism to rehabilitate the household. I had to break, once and for all, the vicious circle of poverty and economic stagnation. Only by curing the abnormal economic structure could we lay the foundation for decent living standards. But I soon came to realize the difficulty of simultaneously achieving our goals of social stability and economic development and the goal of efficient government. I was also aware of the fact that economic development in the capitalist manner requires not only an immense investment of money and materials but also a stable political situation and competent administrators.

To achieve this stability, the military revolutionary government temporarily suspended political activities of students, the press, labor unions, and other social and political organizations, which had caused political crises and social unrest during the rule of the

Democratic Party regime. We also made it clear that civilian government would be restored in 1963.

Meanwhile, we organized a planning committee of college professors and experts with specialized knowledge in many fields. By mobilizing the maximum available expertise for government administration and policy making, we intended to hold in check the arbitrariness and rashness of the military officers. The establishment of this committee served as a turning point. Korean professors began to show positive interest in the realities of the country and to present policy recommendations on the basis of scientific analyses of the country's situation. Even though not all of these recommendations could be justified in terms of efficiency and rationality, their advice was of great help to the revolutionary government. Thus the Confucian tradition of Yi Korea, in which scholars played a positive part in government affairs, seems to have been revived.

The key to improving a backward economy is the way one uses human resources, for economic development is a human undertaking, impossible without combining the people's potential into a dynamic driving force. This task requires not only strong national willpower but also the ability to translate willpower into achievement. Blueprints must be drawn and explained. If people have a sympathetic understanding of a task, they will voluntarily participate in it.

In 1961 the revolutionary government announced the first Five-Year Economic Development Plan (to start in 1962), the first such overall development program ever prepared for Korea. To prepare it, the revolutionary government mobilized all the wisdom and knowledge available and set clear goals, the primary goal being to establish a self-supporting industrial economy. The principle of free enterprise and respect for the creativity of private industry was adopted, for in this way we believed that the private sector would be encouraged to act voluntarily. Under the plan, however, the economy was not entirely free, since development of basic industries was directed by the government.

Taking into consideration the structural characteristics of the Korean economy, the five-year plan gave priority to the following things:

1. Development of energy industries such as coal production and electric power;
2. Expansion of agricultural production aimed at increasing farm income and correcting the structural imbalance of the national economy;
3. Development of basic industries and the economic infrastructure;
4. Maximum utilization of idle resources; increased employment; conservation and utilization of land;
5. Improvement of the balance of payments through export promotion;
6. Promotion of science and technology.

[From Chung-Hee Park, *To Build a Nation*, pp. 101-114]

Questions:

1. What does Pak Chŏnghŭi suggest were the reasons for the military coup of May 16, 1961?
2. What is his ultimate goal? What sort of economic development does he emphasize?
3. What was he willing to do in the name of “stability”? How, would you guess, did Park go about building the “willpower” of the Korean people?
4. How do you imagine Pak’s critics would have seen or portrayed his government?