

# Families of Eight Wrongfully Executed South Korean Political Prisoners Awarded Record Compensation. The People's Revolutionary Party 8

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Bruce Cumings and Hankyoreh

## Introduction

*The large monetary awards to the family members of eight men executed in 1974 as members of the “People’s Revolutionary Party” have no precedent, and mark another milestone in South Korea’s remarkable record of historical reckoning and reconciliation. The twin pillars of this are the reconciliation with North Korea ongoing since Kim Dae Jung was elected president, and the 1995 trials of former presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo for treason in carrying out their serial coup d’etat in 1979-80, which involved the bloody suppression of the Kwangju Rebellion. (Chun was sentenced to death and Roh to life in prison, but President Kim pardoned both of them so they could sit fidgeting on the podium while he was inaugurated in February 1998). Few other countries with long histories of dictatorship have managed democratization with the same measure of justice and magnanimity. South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission comes to mind, and it was indeed a model for both Kim Dae Jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun.*



**Families of the so-called People’s Revolutionary Party weep upon hearing the Supreme Court’s ruling at Seoul Central District Court on Aug. 20. Lee Jong-geun photo**

*Few foreigners recognize the degree to which, not even a decade ago, South Korea needed not just to be reconciled to itself, but to be unified as a country. In many ways the peninsula had three different parts—the North, the South, and the remnants of a strong left wing in the southwest and southeast. Kwangju, a major city in the southwest, had been rebellious since the Tonghak peasant masses marched on Seoul in 1894 and helped to touch off the Sino-Japanese War. Extensive resistance to the Japanese marked the region well into the 1920s, and when the American occupation arrived in 1945, the southwestern and southeastern provinces were the heartland of the strong left that organized and dominated much of the country until the U.S. reemployed Koreans in the national police and the military (who had long collaborated with Japanese imperialism) to*

suppress it. In October 1946 this touched off a major rebellion in Taegu and the surrounding area in the southeast, which then quickly spread to the southwest. During the three years of the U.S. Occupation many political parties had “peoples” or “revolution” in their titles, and it was a commonplace, daily occurrence to see leftists with “people’s revolution” banners flying, clashing with police and rightwing youth groups. People also often switched sides: Park Chung Hee had been an officer in the Japanese army, but was arrested in the 1948 leftist rebellion that started in the southwestern port of Yosŭ.

The Korean War changed all that. It cauterized South Korean politics, making anyone on the left, or from a leftist family, a target of the regime; to be labeled a communist or a leftist was to be blacklisted and ostracized—often by one’s close neighbors, who were desperate to avoid the “Red” taint. Park Chung Hee reinvented himself as an intelligence officer during the war, and seized power in another coup in 1961. He made the Korean Central Intelligence Agency the most powerful political institution in the country, but even with the top business conglomerates, the military, the National Police and the KCIA behind him, he nearly lost the presidential election in 1971—when Kim Dae Jung from the southwest won 46 percent of the vote. That was the proximate cause of Park’s declaration of martial law in 1972 and a new constitution making him president for life. Resistance to his dictatorship persisted, however, with large street demonstrations in 1974 that caused “emergency declarations” to fly around Seoul like bats after dusk. Decree #1 on January 8, 1974 promised to punish anyone who opposed or wanted to revise the 1972 constitution and Decree #4 (April 3) authorized the Education Minister to suspend or expel protesting students.

It was in this context that the dictatorship arrested the “PRP” eight—nearly all of them

from Taegu—in 1974 and charged them with treason. About a year later (on April 8, 1975), General Park issued Decree #7, which simply shut down Korea University. That same day the Supreme Court took ten minutes to rubber stamp the KCIA’s PRP case; the eight men were hanged the next day at dawn. A month later Park issued his infamous Emergency Decree #9, enumerating a long list of crimes including “fabricating and disseminating false rumors” and assembling in any way “disruptive to political order.” As it happened the KCIA had fabricated the People’s Revolutionary Party out of thin air, and tortured the eight individuals until they admitted belonging to it and working with the North to build a communist Korea.



**Park Chung Hee**

A handful of Americans spoke out against this travesty, including Protestant missionary George Ogle and Catholic missionary James Sinott (both of whom Park expelled from the

country), but the general response followed the Nixon and Ford administration's lead: silence. It was one thing to defend protesting students from the premier private school (Korea University), and quite another to speak out on behalf of alleged communists. Furthermore, the U.S. was complicit: even before the war began in 1950, formerly secret Embassy documents show that Washington was not only willing to tolerate almost any abuse against someone deemed a Red, but applauded the use of any means necessary to shut down their activities. After the war, to be a leftist or communist meant the regime could do anything it wanted to you, knowing that little if any resistance would come from Washington.

In February 1985 I was fortunate to be one of the foreigners accompanying Kim Dae Jung back from his exile in the U.S. While our delegation was there we met with family members of the accused PRP people. Their spokesperson was a spunky, pretty woman, who happened to mention that it was very difficult for her to find a husband because of her family background. On our delegation was Bernard Aronson, later George H. W. Bush's Assistant Secretary of State for Inter-American Affairs. As a van took us away, Christopher Hitchens and I observed Mr. Aronson blowing kisses at the woman, and yelling out, "I'll marry you!"

It so happened that one woman from a blacklisted leftist family, Kwon Yang-suk, was able to find a husband: his name was Roh Moo-hyun, who distinguished himself in the 1980s for his work on behalf of activists dissenting from General Chun's dictatorship. More than sixty years after the U.S. first stumbled into an unknown political, social and cultural thicket named not Iraq but Korea, Koreans are finally reclaiming their tortured history for themselves, binding up wounds and trying to make amends. It is an admirable effort. Bruce Cumings

A court ruled that the government pay compensation in the amount of 63.7 billion won (US\$67.4 million) to 46 members of the families of eight men who were once accused of being members of the Inhyeok-dang (People's Revolutionary Party, or PRP). The men, who were found innocent at a retrial held in January, were executed in 1975 for what the government cited as anti-government activities and cooperation with North Korea.

The eight were arrested on charges of treason and violating the National Security Law in 1974, when anti-government student protests spread across the nation. Student activists and opposition leaders demanded an end to the military dictatorship and the repeal of the Yushin Constitution, in force from 1972-1979, which had been revised to allow then-President Park Chung-hee, the father of current opposition leader Park Geun-hye, to stay in power indefinitely.

Park Chung-hee ordered cruel, nationwide crackdowns on political dissidents and student activists in order to further solidify his power. Those who were alleged to have been part of the PRP had grown up together as friends and acquaintances in the region near Daegu, and were arrested in the round-up on false charges of having formed the PRP in order to overthrow the government.

The People's Revolutionary Party was later found to have been a fabrication of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, which predates today's National Intelligence Service, and the fear with which it became associated became a strong tool for Park's ruthless, authoritarian rule. Those accused of being part of the PRP were not only tortured into confessing that they had formed the group, the KCIA also alleged that group members had confessed that their eventual goal was to build a socialist government in close cooperation with North Korea, in violation of the National Security Law, which prohibits both communism and the

recognition of the North as a political entity.

*Eight of the accused were sentenced to death and dozens of others were sentenced to 15 years to life imprisonment. The eight men who were handed death sentences were hastily executed less than 24 hours after the final rulings by the Supreme Court were issued. Human rights organizations, both in South Korea and abroad, have criticized the execution as barbarous, and have long called for reinvestigation of the case.*

*The eight men, Woo Hong-seon, Song Sang-jin, Seo Do-won, Ha Jae-wan, Lee Su-byeong, Kim Yong-won, Doh Ye-jong and Yeo Jeong-nam, were acquitted of all charges in a ruling handed down in January of this year.*

*Following the court's ruling, the families of the men filed a lawsuit against the government, demanding compensation of 34 billion won for the wrongful deaths of their loved ones.*

*In response, the Seoul Central District Court ruled on August 21 that the government must pay 1 billion won to each of the victims, 600 million won to each of their spouses and parents, 350-400 million won to each of their children and 150 million won to each of their brothers and sisters. It is a record amount paid by the state for a case involving political dissent, said the court.*

*According to the ruling, each of the victims' families will receive 2.7-3.3 billion won, or 24.5 billion won altogether. The total compensation will amount to more than 63.7 billion won, with the addition of five-percent annual interest from the day of the victims' execution until now.*

*In its ruling, the court stated: "Although the state is obliged to protect the basic rights of the people and guarantee the dignity and value of each one of them, it took the precious lives*

*of these eight men by using its power to label them as an impure force in society and drive them out. Their family members have suffered from society's cold treatment, social disadvantages and consequential financial difficulties for the past three decades."*

*In response to the government's maintenance that the statute of limitations for seeking compensation is over, the court said, "Prior to the court's admission that the past ruling was wrong, it would have been difficult for the families to sue the government for compensation. We cannot allow the government to be exempt from its responsibility by claiming that the statute of limitations has passed."*

*Shortly after the court's ruling was announced, the families said in a press conference, "We hope that the government will not appeal the decision," adding that the Catholic Human Rights Committee and the families have both decided to spend the compensation funds to build a foundation honoring the deceased.*

*As to whether or not the government would appeal the decision, Hong Man-pyo, an official of the Justice Ministry, said, "The Seoul High Court and the National Intelligence Service will discuss the matter and decide what to do next, after getting approval from the minister."*

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