
Good for the Seoul: The 1988 Olympics as a Vehicle of Democratization

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*The ceremonial torch of the XXIVth Olympiad, Seoul, South Korea, September 1, 1988.
(photograph courtesy of Ken Hackman, U.S. Air Force)*

In 1988, Seoul, South Korea, hosted the summer Olympic Games despite overwhelming odds stacked against the city. Among the challenges: the international community viewed Seoul as a Third World city beleaguered by immense slums and an inadequate infrastructure. Calls for human and political rights drove a series of demonstrations and democratization movements against the authoritarian regimes of Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, while tensions between the North and South Korean governments remained high in the absence of a peace treaty. Furthermore, in the history of the modern Olympic Games, only one other Asian country was successful in their bid to host the games: Tokyo, Japan, in 1964.

Regardless of the challenges, Seoul's campaign to host the 1988 Olympics proved successful, and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) awarded Seoul the 1988 summer games. Even more unlikely, the games proved a major catalyst for political reform and helped remake the Republic of Korea into a thriving modern nation.

This article intends not only to expose the obvious economic and political objectives of South Korea, but also to highlight the substantial impact the preparation and the games themselves had on the Korean public. To the South Koreans, the main purpose of hosting the Olympic Games was to reverse the international opinion of South Korea as a Third World country, to a nation with political and economic legitimacy. However, the games would have another impact entirely: becoming a catalyst for democracy.

Seoul's selection, in fact, came simply because the IOC had to award the games to someone. Three other cities had mounted bids to host the 1988 games: Melbourne, Australia; Athens, Greece; and Nagoya, Japan. However, by May of 1981, Melbourne had withdrawn from contention due to economic concerns; whereas Athens' withdrawal from consideration can be attributed to the myth that the city aspired to host the games permanently. "Melbourne had withdrawn in February, as had Athens, whose bid was apparently linked to the idea that Athens would provide a permanent home for the Games," concluded Christopher Hill, a leading historian of the modern games.¹

Within the IOC it was generally accepted that an Asian city would have top priority over other international cities as the host site of the 1988 games. "There seems also to have been a general feeling in Lausanne [IOC Headquarters] that it was time to award the games to an eastern city, as they had been held in the Americas or Europe ever since the Tokyo games of 1964," explained Hill.² This may have also influenced the Olympic committees of Melbourne and Athens to withdraw their bids. The only real competition remaining was from Nagoya, Japan. Nagoya was the clear front runner and obvious choice. The city had been campaigning for the games for nearly two years, was recognized internationally as a legitimate host, and was familiar with how to host the games as they were only twenty-four years removed from the Tokyo games of 1964. However, the Korean Olympic Committee (KOC) worked diligently to influence the decisions of the voting members of the IOC. The KOC was clearly willing to win the games by any means necessary. The experienced, although bitter, organizer of the 1984 Summer Olympic Games, Peter Ueberroth noted the KOC's desperation to host the games. "Seoul also gave away, quietly, two first-class roundtrip tickets to each IOC member. The tickets were easily redeemed for cash; many were," he recalled.³ To add to suspicions of corruption, Olympic delegates were met by the brilliant smiles of many of Korea's most beautiful women, including former Miss Koreas and airline hostesses when they arrived in Baden Baden, West Germany, for the selection conference.⁴

In short, Seoul simply worked harder and more aggressively than its rival. The KOC was highly motivated by what the Olympic Games could offer Seoul and the Korean peninsula in particular: a step toward reunification of the Korean peninsula or improved relations with its once paternalistic ruler, Japan. South Korea was willing to take on the economic risks that host cities confront, all the while recognizing its political and economic possibilities. The games were meant to display the economic growth and national power of South Korea, for the purpose of establishing diplomatic relations with both communist and non-communist nations.

Moreover, the classic Olympic Games were meant to serve as a respite from politics, though the modern games serve as anything but: they are filled with political and economic agendas, boycotts, blacklists, terrorist threats, medal counts, and doping scandals. For South Koreans, though, hosting the Olympic Games would not only serve as a means to display their athletic prowess, but hosting would also serve as a mechanism to gain economic and political legitimacy within the international community. "It should come as no surprise, then, that in bidding in 1981 to host the summer games of 1988, the Korean government headed by President Chun Doo Hwan had in mind a variety of economic and political objectives," concluded one close observer.⁵ If nothing else, an international event as large as the Olympics would draw notice to the continued threat of North Korean hostility, which the Hwan administration viewed as the highest security threat to the

¹ Christopher R. Hill. *Olympic Politics: Athens to Atlanta 1896-1996*, 2nd ed., (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 166.

² Ibid., 168.

³ Ibid., 168.

⁴ Don Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1997), 180-181.

⁵ Jarol B. Manheim, "Rites of Passage: The 1988 Seoul Olympics as Public Diplomacy," *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, no.2 (June 1990), 280

games.⁶ Adding even more incentive for Seoul to win the bid, hosting the Olympic Games would signify Korea's arrival as an economic contributor to the international community.⁷ There was even a state sponsored assassination attempt on Hwan's life that killed eighteen senior South Korean officials when a bomb was prematurely detonated.⁸

Proceedings became even more complicated when North Korea demanded a role as co-host of the games in 1986. Intense negotiations followed between the IOC and Olympic Committees of the North and South to seek a solution. Few nations involved in the Olympics movement had formal relations with North Korea, but the IOC always encouraged cooperation between Seoul and Pyongyang. IOC President Juan Antonio Samaranch, moved perhaps by longstanding beliefs that the international Olympics was a vehicle to promote peace, sought an acceptable arrangement. He offered North Korea the opportunity to host table tennis, archery, and some cycling and soccer events above the 17th parallel.⁹ Some South Korean officials were even willing to extend to the North more opportunities to host Olympic competition, but Samaranch insisted the North's unconditional acceptance of the committee's first offer before furthering negotiations.¹⁰ When negotiations proved fruitless after Pyongyang refused to accept the IOC's proposal, North Korea isolated itself from Olympic competition and called for its allies to do the same.

Despite North Korea's opposition and refusal to work with the IOC and KOC, the willingness of Olympic officials to negotiate with North Korea demonstrated that they were doing their very best to appeal to the North Koreans. As a result, the USSR, multiple Eastern European countries, and various other Communist states chose to participate freely in the Seoul Olympics. In fact, Moscow and other eastern bloc nations ignored North Korea's boycott request. China sent a team to the 1986 Seoul Asian Games, and even its most trusted ally Cuba was recently named host of the 1991 Pan American games under the condition that they would attend the 1988 Olympics.¹¹ However, North Korea would ultimately demonstrate its disdain by ordering two highly trained espionage agents to bomb the KAL flight 858 on November 29th 1987, which killed all 115 persons on board, mainly South Korean men on their way home from projects in the Middle East. The confession by the surviving saboteur revealed Pyongyang's plans to disrupt the Olympics at all costs.¹² Seoul was inevitably forced to take extensive precautions to ensure the safety of the impending arrival of Olympic athletes and spectators, as well as to prevent further acts of violence.¹³

The threat of boycotts subsided as the games drew closer, although, there remained doubts in the international community concerning whether Seoul would be able to ensure the safety of the Olympic athletes. The fear of further acts of terrorism clouded the opening of the Seoul Games on September 17. Both China and the Soviet Union, however, sent athletes, and their governments assured the United States that North Korea would make no effort to disturb the Games.¹⁴ Amidst the age of Olympic boycotts, Soviet and Chinese participation in the games certainly represented the

⁶Directorate of Intelligence, "South Korea: Terrorist Threats to the Seoul Olympics," Central Intelligence Agency, May 3, 1988, CREST CIA Records, CIA-RDP90T00100R000201120001-7.pdf301.69 KB, accessed 7 May 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp90t00100r000201120001-7>.

⁷Jarol B. Manheim. "Rites of Passage: The 1988 Seoul Olympics as Public Diplomacy," *The Western Political Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (June 1990), 282.

⁸Directorate of Intelligence, "South Korea: Terrorist Threats to the Seoul Olympics."

⁹Allen Guttman, *The Olympics: A History of the Modern Games* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 165-166.

¹⁰Directorate of Intelligence, "North Korea-South Korea: The 1988 Seoul Olympic Games," Central Intelligence Agency, December 12, 1986, CREST CIA Records, CIA-RDP86T01017R000706930001-5.pdf, accessed 7 May 2018, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp86t01017r000706930001-5>.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Directorate of Intelligence, "South Korea: Terrorist Threats to the Seoul Olympics." Central Intelligence Agency.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴ Alfred E. Senn, *Power, Politics, and the Olympic Games: A History of the Power Brokers, Events, and Controversies That Shaped the Games* (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 1999), 228.

end of Cold War tensions by sending a diplomatic message to the rest of the world that the two sides, East and West, were ready to attempt to return to the original ideals of the Olympic Games.

To fully understand how the Olympics served as a vehicle for democratization in South Korea, an understanding of the political, social, and economic climate of Korea in the years leading up to the games is necessary. ROK President Park Chung Hee, who recognized how the Tokyo Olympics served as a turning point in improving Japan's international image during the post-war years, placed the initial bid to host the games in 1979. Park sought to do the very same for Korea as the 1964 games had done for Japan, as he admired the Japanese model for using the Olympics to promote economic growth. Tragically, Park was unable to see this plan play out as he was assassinated in 1979 just before South Korea began its official push to host the games.

“For nearly all its existence since the liberation from Japan and the division of the country in 1945, South Korea had been dominated by strong rulers exercising virtually unchecked powers,” wrote journalist Don Oberdorfer.¹⁵ Following the assassination of Park in 1979, the means by which his successor Chun Doo Hwan acquired the position of leadership in South Korea can be defined as a coup d'etat in all but name. Although South Korea saw immense economic growth during the reigns of Park and Chun, public discontent with authoritarian rule increased, and from 1980-1987 protests in the name of democracy would send South Korea down a new path from which there was no turning back.

Park's death left an absence of leadership in the South Korean government, and, in early 1980, South Korea came under partial martial law. Consequently, politicians against military rule and student demonstrators began to demand that martial law be lifted and direct presidential elections be established. Meanwhile, Chun was safeguarding his rule by enhancing his personal network within the armed forces from his post as chief of the Defense Security Command. In mid-April he was named acting KCIA director, a position that provided him immense new authority. It also convinced the United States that Chun planned to seize the presidency, a move the global superpower did not support.¹⁶ The number of demonstrators began to rise to the tens of thousands and poured outwardly from universities into the streets of South Korean cities. As tensions increased, so did the likelihood that Chun and his administration would use military resources to put an end to the protests. Chun also ordered the arrest of a political rival, New Democratic Republic Party leader Kim Dae Jung, which would obviously add fuel to the fire. Chun ordered the Army to invade Jung's house as allowed by martial law, and combed it for political information as the political adversary was imprisoned. Soldiers also arrested several of his secretaries, bodyguards, and close political allies.¹⁷

After three days of arrests and attacks by Korean Special Forces, the citizens of Kwangju, a city in the southwest of the ROK, began to retaliate against Chun's crackdown. Over 30,000 citizens of Kwangju gathered to keep troops out of town, and by the time the city was retaken, initial reports had 170 citizens killed. These atrocities fueled unending and severe opposition to Chun and his allies in the military.¹⁸ Despite Chun's initial position of using the military as a last resort, full martial law had been reinstated by 1981, as universities closed and censorship of the Korean press was enforced.

Because of the censorship of the Korean press under the martial law of Chun, the United States' position was understood by many to be acquiescent and supportive, even though American officials repeatedly urged a negotiated settlement between the rivals. A government-controlled radio

¹⁵Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 161.

¹⁶Ibid., 124.

¹⁷Ibid., 127.

¹⁸Ibid., 129.

station head in Kwangju reported that the United States supported Chun's use of special operation forces in Kwangju. American officials demanded a retraction of the report, but it was never given.¹⁹

The situation in Kwangju served as the first and most influential of many demonstrations by those who opposed authoritarian rule. By the mid-1980s there began a worldwide trend of the democratization of authoritarian regimes, most famously in the Philippines. In 1986, the United States grudgingly supported the "people power" movement that removed Ferdinand Marcos from power; intriguing many South Korean citizens. IOC President Samaranch made very clear that the games in Seoul might be moved elsewhere in case of widespread protests such as the ones in Kwangju in 1980 and 1981. Korea's leaders knew that the IOC would have little problem finding a more experienced and willing city to host the games on short notice if they used military intervention to quell student demonstrations.²⁰ A reversal of the IOC's decision in favor of Seoul would be a disaster for South Korea and its leadership.

In 1986, the Korean public was infatuated with the political arrangements of the Chun administration. Early in Chun's reign, the authoritarian leader promised to return South Korea to a democracy after his one term as president. In April of 1986, Chun returned from a trip to Europe and was convinced that a parliamentary system of government was best suited for South Korea. Those opposed to authoritarian rule in Korea viewed this as a threat and as a means for Chun to hang on to power as his term was coming to an end in 1987. The opposition felt Chun could then easily control an electoral college that would allow him to choose his successor.

As the end of Chun's presidential term neared, those skeptical of Chun grew uneasy with anticipation to see if he would remain true to his promise to the public. Anything short of direct presidential elections would be reason enough to pour into the streets, just as they had in Kwangju. Only this time in May 1986, the demonstrations began in the city of Inchon, site of General Douglas MacArthur's surprise invasion in 1950.²¹ The anti-Chun demonstrators, who number over one million, came mostly from Korea's higher education institutions, although occasionally they were joined by industrial workers.²² The location was no doubt a symbolic message from the opposition whose anti-Chun and anti-American sentiments stem from the Kwangju uprising and the belief of some that the American government was using Chun as a puppet to fulfill its own Cold War purposes.

Demonstrations at Inchon were countered with a tank-like vehicle that spewed pepper spray. By April of 1987, Chun banned any consideration of constitutional revisions until after the 1988 Olympics.²³ This meant that the next president would be selected by an electorate that would be easily controlled by Chun. On June 10th, 1987, Roh Tae Woo was officially nominated to run for president by the Democratic Justice Party, and hours later additional violent protests erupted across the country. It was clear that the Korean public did not approve of Roh as Chun's successor. In fact, "he was seen by much of the public as 'the bald man with a wig,' meaning Chun in disguise--just another general who would continue dictatorial rule," commented Don Oberdorfer.²⁴

The demonstrations of 1987 became known as the "June Resistance" and represent a key turning point; a visual shift from authoritarian rule to democratic rule can be seen as the Korean middle-class contributed more support to the protests. During the last two weeks of June, the demonstrations were the largest single story in the American press, surpassing the Iran-Contra affair.

¹⁹Ibid, 130.

²⁰Hill, *Olympic Politics*, 170.

²¹Ibid, 165.

²²Oberdorfer, *The Two Koreas*, 161.

²³Ibid, 166.

²⁴Ibid, 167.

The Reagan administration was under constant pressure to take a stand, but clearly struggled with how to intervene without causing a coup that would undoubtedly restore military rule once again. Ultimately, the United States chose to intervene through the issuance of a personal letter from Reagan to Chun that can be summarized as a plea for Chun to remain committed to the peaceful transfer of power, break free from the nostalgia of old politics, restore free press, promote negotiations, and support fair elections in the name of national unity.

As word of an American letter spread, ever more demonstrators poured into the streets prompting Chun to further contemplate military intervention yet again. However, as Chun grew closer to mobilization, he changed his mind, deciding to focus on amicable negotiations as opposed to using the military to put an end to the protests. One could easily speculate that Chun's decision to negotiate with protestors was influenced out of fear of losing the Olympics to another host city.

For the first time, a serious discussion took place among members of the ruling party about the public demand for direct presidential elections on June 21st, 1987 during the National Assembly's day-long caucus.²⁵ Surprisingly, newly inaugurated President Roh Tae Woo agreed to the opposition's demands for direct presidential elections, which would be used as the basis of his political campaign. On December 16th, 1987, Roh Tae Woo would win the presidency of South Korea in an election reminiscent of the American election of 1860.

Furthermore, the 1988 Olympics played a crucial role in the establishment of democratic rule in South Korea. The "June Resistance" was widely covered by international media who were obviously present in preparation for the upcoming games. "The presence of the international media and their coverage of South Korea (as the next Olympics host country) and its politics gave added impetus to student demonstrators and opposition politicians, and international mass media reports conferred legitimacy," concluded two scholars who studied the demonstrations.²⁶ Thus, many newspapers were able to report that Korea truly was a democracy that provided basic liberties such as free press. Out of fear of losing the Olympics altogether, the South Korean government decided not to use troops against protestors.²⁷

Despite tensions on the streets of South Korea, the last thing the government wanted was for the IOC to rescind its decision to host the games. If South Korea had been unable to peacefully resolve the protests, then most likely the IOC would have no other choice but to withdraw from the city. Therefore, it is quite likely that the Korean public knew how significant the Olympic Games would be to its ultimate goal of bringing democracy to the Korean peninsula. People understood how eager the Chun administration was to host the Olympics in Seoul as part of his campaign to improve the international opinion of South Korea. With the world watching, the public used the Olympics as a shield to push for direct presidential elections. Chun's administration would have undoubtedly used military intervention to stop the protests had the upcoming Olympics not have caused qualms. This is likely, as Chun used Korean Special Forces during the Kwangju incident when the thoughts of hosting the Olympics were in its infancy. As stories of the "June Resistance" filled the pages of American and international newspapers, Chun came under a microscope, and it is certainly no coincidence that the impending arrival of the Olympic games created a reluctance to use military intervention to placate the "June Resistance."

In the end, the Seoul games passed without violence, and there seemed to be a shift in media focus from politics to the struggle against performance enhancing drugs, as Canadian Ben Johnson astonished the world by sprinting 100 meters in 9.79 seconds, which would be a new world record.

²⁵ Ibid., 171.

²⁶ J.A. Mangan and Gwang Ok, "Seoul'88 – Media, Politicians, Public: Confrontation, Cooperation and Democratic Consequences," *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 29, no. 16 (2012): 2276–2292.

²⁷ David R. Black and Shona Bezanson, "The Olympic Games, Human Rights and Democratization: Lessons from Seoul and Implications for Beijing," *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 7 (2004): 1245–1261.

However, in a major scandal, the IOC disqualified the sprinter from competition and negated his records, after Johnson tested positive for anabolic steroids.²⁸ In a sense, the doping scandal proved advantageous for Seoul since it drew attention away from the tense politics surrounding the Olympics. Although the games today are mostly remembered for the Ben Johnson controversy, the historically significant story is the political benefit the games had for South Korea.

During an era when the credibility of the Olympics was tarnished due to boycotts, blacklists, terrorist threats, medal counts, and doping scandals, Seoul gained international legitimacy. South Korea was also able to overcome decades of human rights abuses that prompted the sometimes violent and even deadly demonstrations. The Olympics assisted the citizens of South Korea in successfully installing a government that transfers authority from one regime to another, peacefully, through democratic elections. The 1988 Olympics can be considered an immense success particularly in the political and economic sense. Politically, the games served as the catalyst that brought democracy to the country. As a result, the newly elected president Roh Tae Woo was able to develop diplomatic relationships, outside of the traditional democratic ones, with other socialist countries such as the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Economically, growth rates grew eight to ten percent, and there were no signs of a serious economic downturn.²⁹ In the beginning, while it was evident that the Korean government sought economic stimulation and political legitimacy; the Korean public had a plan of their own and were after something far more progressive.

²⁸ Guttman, *The Olympics*, 170.

²⁹ National Intelligence Council, “*South Korea After the Olympics.*” Director of Central Intelligence, August 23, 1988.