A part of the political struggle against the authoritarian regime, some South Korean citizens challenged the official narrative, constructing an alternative national history. The genealogy of the post-liberation power elites was traced back to pro-Japanese collaboration, leading to the conclusion that the nation was in need of a new ruling elite. Amidst this, an alternative narrative credits the successful democratization movement in South Korea to the 1987 student protests and the judicial reviews of countless citizens. The state had tried to assuage public anger by admitting political responsibility for the unlawful deaths of countless citizens. The state’s failure to address these cases of political violence resulted in the public disgrace of former President Chun Doo Hwan as a result of the public hearing held in 1993 following direct presidential elections in 1987. Ruling party candidate Roh Tae Woo succeeded Chun Doo Hwan as president of the Republic of Korea. Although these elections had been a formal victory for the democratization movement, they failed to dislodge the established political, military, and bureaucratic elite. Their hold on power prevented a clear-cut break with the authoritarian past and stymied the call for legal justice. When in 1993 Kim Young Sam became the first democratically elected president of South Korea, he was faced with the task of uprooting all remnants of the old elites. Institutionally well entrenched, they prevented an overhanded admission of state responsibility for the unlawful deaths of countless citizens. The state had tried to assuage public anger by offering compensation at various times, but failed to establish legal responsibility. Instead, the process of democratization, and ushered on by a broad-based opposition movement, political accounts were settled through successive National Assembly special parliamentary investigations.

No incident has left such a deep and festered wound in Korean society as the suppression of the 1988 Kwangju Uprising. With a National Assembly controlled by the opposition parties, Roh Tae Woo’s government was unable to stop National Assembly hearings into the Kwangju Uprising and the December coup d’état that preceded it. These hearings resulted in the public disgrace of former President Chun Doo Hwan, who in December 1988 was forced to publicly apologize to the Korean people for forgiveness for the pain he had caused. Following this confession, he retired to a remote Buddhist temple for a period of repentance and contemplation.

Despite shaming a former president into a public confession of remorse, public calls for legal justice continued until 1995, ultimately forcing President Kim Young Sam to have both Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo stand trial for their involvement in the 11 December 1979 coup d’état and the suppression of the subsequent Kwangju Uprising. In a world premiere, two former presidents were sentenced in April 1995, only to be freed again in 1996. This national reconciliation was brought about by outgoing President Kim Young Sam and President-elect Kim Dae Jung, who pardoned them in December 1995. By inviting both disgraced former presidents to his inauguration, Kim Dae Jung, himself a former victim of state violence, showed a remarkable commitment to personal and political reconciliation in an attempt to wipe South Korea’s political slate clean, and put the endless cycle of retribution to rest. With a token of political and legal justice achieved, and with a commitment to have the state make amends for individual cases of blatant injustice, Kim Dae Jung hoped for a brighter future.

The magnanimity of the president may have succeeded in removing the past from the political agenda, it is beyond his power to impose a settlement to the smouldering feeling of injustice in some affected quarters of Korean society. The administration and acceptance of justice is too tightly interwoven with the politics of memory. Raison d’état inevitably fails to administer sufficient legal, political, or social justice. It is up to historians to help society come to grips with an unsavoury past by addressing these remnant feelings of injustice. However, when history is moralized, and historians, under the guise of administering ‘historical justice’, mount a ‘struggle over memory’ more disharmonious results.

Despite paying lip service to the importance of national reconciliation, the historians to the Korean Journal volume 3, number 1, 국내 출판 3:1, 1997, December. Con- cerned with the future course of Korea’s history, they pro- claim that ‘the future starts with correct memories’ (p.189). As activist historians rooted in the democratization move- ment, they ‘correct’ national history by imposing a different ideological reading based on a ‘people’s’ point of view. Link- ing the failure of the legal justice system to thoroughly prosec- ute pro-Japanese collaborators to the excesses of the post- liberation authoritarian regimes, they expose the ruling elites as anti-national, ostracizing them from the mainstream of the nation’s history. Strongly nationalistic, even nativist, critics reconstruct the national history on the implicit condition that these tainted elites are removed not only from the nation’s history, but also from any future role in society (pp.15-6). For a political struggle this may be a worthwhile cause; in terms of historiography it is hardly inno- creuation, Kim Dae Jung, himself a former victim of state vio- lence, showed a remarkable commitment to personal and politi- cal reconciliation in an attempt to wipe South Korea’s political slate clean, and put the endless cycle of retribution to rest. With a token of political and legal justice achieved, and with a commitment to have the state make amends for individual cases of blatant injustice, Kim Dae Jung hoped for a brighter future.

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