Chun Doo-hwan’s Case Ended with his Death

On November 23, 2021, Chun Doo-hwan, the most popularly disliked former president of the Republic of Korea, passed away as President of the so-called Fifth Republic from 1980 to 1988.

Born in 1931 to a poor peasant family, Chun Doo-hwan entered the military academy in 1951. At the academy, he became friends with Roh Tae-woo, who later became his right-hand man.

In 1961, Captain Chun Doo-hwan led a rally of military academy cadets in support of Park Chung-hee’s rise to power, and in 1979 he became head of military intelligence. Park Chung-hee was assassinated in October 1979, and on December 12, 1979, Chun Doo-hwan staged a military coup, imposed martial law, and became the country’s de facto leader.

As documents uncovered by the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum revealed in September 2021, the United States opposed possible counterterrorism within the military. When William Gleysteen, US Ambassador to South Korea, discovered that the opposition to Chun Doo-hwan was about to stage another military coup, he urged Washington not to give the go-ahead, as it would be potentially disastrous for the Republic of Korea. Gleysteen said the US government needs to make it clear that any further fighting of this kind could destroy the US-ROK relationship and “radically increase the danger from North Korea.”
The main event that Chun’s name is associated with within the history of the ROK is the suppression of the Gwangju uprising in 1980, which the author has covered in detail. According to official figures, more than 200 people were killed and 1,800 wounded. However, several publications speak of a couple of thousand dead, and representatives of relevant NGOs claim that the regime killed some ten thousand. No secret graves have been found yet. It is also unknown who exactly gave the order to fire on the civilians. The independent commission established in 2020 has yet to share meaningful findings or results.

After retiring as an army general in August 1980, Chun forced President Choi Kyu-hah to resign and became president through a specially selected electoral college. His eight-year rule was marked by a brutal crackdown against the democracy movement. Chun reformed the Constitution, which included indirect presidential elections, a 7-year presidential term, the president’s right to declare a state of emergency, and the dissolution of parliament.

There were also special camps where people were sent extrajudicially, and a person could end up there either for left-wing views, for long hair, for trying to break up a fight, or for not paying bills. According to a 2006 government report, 54 people died in the camp. This topic has not been closed until now. On November 16, 2021, another group of victims filed a claim for damages against the government.

The country’s economy was indeed showing strong growth at the time, and thanks to the weak dollar and low oil prices, it has shown double-digit growth rates in four of the seven years of Chun’s rule. At the same time, Chun Administration managed to control consumer prices, reducing the inflation rate from 21.4% in 1981 to 3.4% in 1983.

Some Chun supporters also credit him with helping Seoul win the bid to host the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Summer Olympics, which raised the country’s profile on the international stage. Although it wasn’t him directly, it was Roh Tae-woo.

In 1983, during a visit to Burma, Chun Doo-hwan survived an assassination attempt, most likely carried out by North Koreans, but 17 high-ranking South Korean officials were killed.

In June 1987, thousands of students and citizens took to the streets after Seoul National University student Park Jong Chul was killed in brutal police torture. Chun Doo-hwan vetoed a debate on constitutional amendments to ensure the democratization of society. Against the backdrop of large-scale demonstrations, Chun was forced to hand over power to his running mate Roh Tae-woo.

After resigning as President, Chun retired to a remote Buddhist monastery, where he spent two years, and in November 1988 publicly apologized for accumulating a large number of “gifts and donations” during his presidency.

In 1996, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were charged with corruption, treason, and conspiracy to seize power. Chun Doo-hwan was sentenced to death but later changed to life imprisonment. He was also ordered to pay back 220 billion won ($1.88 billion) that he pocketed during his presidency.

In the same year, he and Roh Tae-woo were pardoned “in the name of national unity,” but the order to return the money remained in effect. Chun did claim that his remaining fortune was only 290,000 won. However, in 2013, under Park Geun-hye, prosecutors set up a task force to recover Chun’s unpaid fine of 167.2 billion won and found secret accounts where the money was stored.

Roh Tae-woo showed some sign of compassion, but Chun never did apologize for what he had done or even expressed regret for those who died in the Gwangju uprising, which he called a “riot.”

In his memoir, written in 2017, Chun Doo-hwan claimed that North Korean troops were involved in the uprising, after which a court issued an injunction to stop the memoir from being distributed.

In 2018, Chun was accused of defaming a late priest, Cho Pius, known as the Catholic priest Cho Chul-hyun, who claimed to have witnessed Chun’s troops firing from helicopters at demonstrators.

In late November 2020, Chun was sentenced to eight months in prison with a two-year suspended sentence, but both sides appealed. On August 21 this year, Chun Doo-hwan was diagnosed with multiple myeloma, a type of blood cancer that affects plasma cells.

The public reaction to Chun’s death was far more united than to Roh Tae-woo’s death a little earlier. As KBS wrote, the former general who seized power in a military coup in 1979 has left a deep scar in modern Korean history that has yet to heal.
The Blue House was limited to expressing regret that Chun had died without an apology.

The ruling Democratic Party said the deceased was not entitled to a state funeral or burial in a national cemetery because of his past crimes.

Lee Jae-myung, the presidential candidate of the ruling Democratic Party of Korea, called Chun the main perpetrator of the massacre. Other MPs whose constituencies are in the Gwangju region have shown similar reactions.

There will be no state funeral, which Roh Tae-woo was honored with, and the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs informed that Chun Doo-hwan cannot be buried in the national cemetery next to the heroes because of his treason conviction. The libel trial against the former president is expected to conclude in connection with his death, although left-wing NGOs are strongly opposed. “Chun’s death does not mean that the crimes he committed have disappeared. We will continue working to solve his crimes,” said Kim Young Hoon, who heads a civilian group made up of family members of the deceased. Another NGO, Advocates for a Democratic Society, noted that Chun’s death does not mean that he committed all the criminal acts and his associates or the truth of history will disappear.

Anyway, it will no longer be possible to put the perpetrator of the Gwangju tragedy away, although history has passed its own verdict on him.

**Konstantin Asmolov, PhD in History, leading research fellow at the Center for Korean Studies of the Institute of the Far East at the Russian Academy of Sciences, exclusively for the online magazine “New Eastern Outlook”**.