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Recommended Citation

"Address by President Roh Moo-hyun on the 60th Anniversary of National Liberation", NAPSNet Special Reports, August 30, 2005, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-special-reports/address-by-president-roh-moo-hyun-on-the-60th-anniversary-of-national-liberation/>

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Special Report 05-71A: August 30th, 2005

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by President Roh Moo-hyun

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I. Introduction

South Korea President Roh Moo-hyun delivered this speech on the 60th anniversary of Korean liberation. President Roh said: "History now gives us another calling. It is none other than putting an end to the history of divisiveness and opening an age of national unity. It is also to build a springboard to overcome the age of national division and usher in a new age of national unification for peace and prosperity."

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II. Address by President Roh Moo-hyun

- "Address by President Roh Moo-hyun on the 60th Anniversary of National Liberation"

Fellow Koreans and compatriots residing overseas,

Sixty years ago from today we reclaimed the country we had lost. Over the ensuing sixty years, Korea has managed to stand tall in the community of nations. And we are engaged in an energetic march toward a promising future. Our forefathers would be pleased to see this.

On this significant day, I bow in respect to our patriotic ancestors who gave everything for the sovereignty and independence of the nation. A tribute and words of appreciation are owed to all citizens who have endeavored with their sweat and blood to make the Republic as it is today.

Fellow citizens,

Over the years, congratulatory addresses marking the Liberation Day have been concentrated on enumerating and reaffirming new hopes and plans for the future. Today, however, I would like to start my remarks with dark accounts of bygone years. My intention is to reflect on our mistakes of the past and what we should be vigilant about in the years to come so that we will not repeat the same history.

The fundamental reason why Korea was colonized was the imperialistic world order that swept the world at the time. Much as the imperialistic waves had been rough and high, we would not have lost our country if we had been prepared internally to meet the challenge.

Often, our forefathers are said to have been uninformed of the state of international affairs. Of course, that is true. But I do not think that was the decisive factor. There were some leaders who had insight into the international situation and offered countermeasures to save the country, none of which were successful. That is because the nation was powerless and divided. Even if the country had had plans, it lacked the strength to implement them. Whatever strength it had could not be channeled into a unified force because different factions were fighting against one another.

The country failed to nurture its strength because the ruling group that refused to make accommodations for any changes whatsoever and because those who had vested interests also allied with the ruling group. Indulged in exclusive and dogmatic ideologies, the ruling group rejected alternative thoughts and systems; they did not even spare the lives of those who advocated new ways of thinking. Their justifications might have been grand; unfortunately, however, their conclusions were always to protect the vested interests.

The ruling group also waged life-and-death struggles for power among themselves. Their sophisticated ideologies were used as a tool for outright power struggles. The group was badly divided within.

Thoroughly eliminating all opponents who might check and balance their power, the ruling group were engaged in endless corruption and irregularities and exploited and pushed the people into extreme despair. They uprooted the lives of the people, who were made to distrust and resist their rulers, and as a result, the people and the ruling group went their separate ways.

To recap, the stubborn pursuit of vested interests, dogmatic thinking, corruption, irregularities, and

life-and-death power struggles of the ruling class as well as the resulting national division and confrontation were the internal causes that devastated the nation and eventually led to the loss of sovereignty.

Fellow Koreans,

When our descendants in the distant future look back on our times, I do not expect that they will say that we were left in the dark concerning the international situation. Following the collapse of the Cold War system, I believe the successive Korean administrations have coped well with the changing world order. In the years to come, the Korean people will also continue to adapt proactively to the international situations surrounding the Korean Peninsula and adjacent region. We have sufficient wisdom to do so.

Korea will not be in jeopardy for a lack of strength. Developments in science and technology as well as the fostering of able manpower will be accelerated. Democracy and market economy will progress further. Based on these grounds, the creativity and diversity of the Korean people will fully blossom. The nation is steadily developing independent military power sufficient to safeguard itself.

No dogmatic thinking will be able to prevent social changes any more. No dictatorship will emerge again to trample civil rights and repress freedom. Illegal acts committed by the government agencies and the collusion of the Government and business and that of the government and the press will all become matters of the past.

Right now, various scandals are making the nation angry, but they are in fact things of the past. I do not know whether some other similar incidents might be uncovered in future; even so, however, they can only be matters of the past. In the future, no one will be able to enjoy special rights or special benefits in such illicit manners, and no one will be allowed to reap benefits through unfair competitions.

Fellow citizens,

To my regrets, there are some problems of which I cannot speak with confidence. Some people might ask me how much of the deep-rooted historic divisiveness has been healed, what other possible causes for divisiveness the nation is likely to suffer in the future, and whether these will put the nation into a crisis again. Indeed, it is difficult for me to say no with confidence to these questions.

By and large, Korean society still has three elements of division. The first element is the scar stemming from the historic legacy of division, the second is the structural division caused by the political process, and the third is the division caused by social and economic imbalance and disparity.

In order to put the country on a firm foundation for sustained development and to prevent it from falling into a crisis again, we must eliminate without fail the causes and structures of divisiveness and conflicts.

Fellow citizens,

The scars stemming from the historic legacy of division are based on the confrontations between the pro-Japanese and anti-Japanese camps, between the leftists and rightists, and between the dictatorial regimes and resistance forces. To overcome this division, we should properly review and reckon the historical events of each era.

The division and conflicts attributed to the pro-Japanese acts of some people have not been eradicated even today after 60 years of liberation. When the country was liberated, the acts of the pro-Japanese people were buried in the midst of intense conflicts between rightists and leftists and the pro-Japanese forces were allowed to prosper. As a result, they have gone unpunished and we have failed to disclose the truth of history.

Fortunately, the National Assembly enacted the Special Law on Truths Concerning Anti-Korean Activities During Forcible Japanese Occupation last year, and legislated the Basic Law on the Review of Past History for Truth and Reconciliation this year. These bills will enable us to disclose the nature of pro-Japanese and anti-Korean activities, which is long overdue, and to discover the remaining half in the history of the nation's independence movement that has not seen light so far. If these tasks are completed properly, the division and conflict in our society resulting from the colonial history will enter the final phase of reconciliation once and for all.

When the pending Special Law on the Recovery of Properties of the People Who Carried Out Pro-Japanese, Anti-Korean Activities is passed in the National Assembly, a historical anomaly will be eliminated so that the descendants of the perpetrators of the anti-Korean activities will no longer be able to enjoy the wealth accumulated by their ancestors at the cost of the nation and country.

After liberation, the long drawn-out face-off and fighting between the leftists and rightists and between the dictatorial regimes and the opposition forces have left a culture of confrontation and conflict.

The leftists and rightists, who had mutually intolerable value systems, used to be engaged in terrorism and slaughter. The dictatorial regimes also carried out wiretapping and surveillance, arrests and imprisonments, and torture and blackmailing, and finally concocted crimes to kill the innocent. Naturally, the partisan politics of the ruling and opposition parties as well as the anti-dictatorship movement were also turned into struggles that could not tolerate compromises.

Even now, it is perhaps a legacy of confrontational culture rejecting tolerance that the ruling and opposition parties do not acknowledge each other, and politics is swayed by the idea that dialogues and compromises are breaches of trust and acts of collusion. The progress of democracy will be delayed as much as it takes until we overcome such a culture.

What is more serious than such cultural legacy, however, is the fact that many incidents of the past remain yet to be clarified and, consequently, the wounds suffered by the victims have not been healed and the responsibility of the state has not ended.

It is fortunate that truth as well as historical facts can be clarified through the Basic Law on the Review of Past History for Truth and Reconciliation. However, we should keep in mind some points as we resolve past wrongdoings.

First of all, we should see to it that the wounds and sustained pain of those victims be healed to pave the way for genuine reconciliation. To do that, truth should be thoroughly explored, an apology made, compensation or reparation given and then honor restored.

Next, the legitimacy of and public trust in the state should be recovered. The illegal acts done by the government agencies against citizens have greatly tarnished the integrity and credibility of the state. The Government should take the lead in clarifying the truth, make a public apology, and do its best to fulfill its responsibilities for compensation or reparation.

The Basic Law contains relevant regulations, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to be

established at the end of this year is to set standards that are just and equitable. If that is considered insufficient, we may then consider a supplementary law. If new legislation is to be initiated, the possibility of retrials should be left open to help those unjustly convicted recover their honor.

Furthermore, with regard to the crimes abusing government power to violate human rights and the fundamental democratic order as well as the compensations and reparations for the victims of such crimes, we should enact a law that waives, or allows proper adjustments to, the application of civil and criminal statutes of limitation. The purpose is to prevent the state from abusing its power to deprive people of their lives and property and then claim immunity or even try to build up its defense case shamelessly.

This way, we will be able to recover the credibility of the Government and have justice prevail.

Fellow citizens,

The divisive structure of our society resulting from the political process is regional divisiveness and the confrontational political culture. Until they are eliminated, it will be hard to shake off the endless division and confrontation.

The region-based political structure distorts democracy. The basis of democracy is elections. If the voters' opinions are distorted, democracy will be distorted. In the past, the military-influenced dictatorships fanned regional divisiveness in a bid to distort public opinion. Such a trend became solidified into the region-based political structure through the presidential election of 1987 and the three-party merger of 1990.

The region-based structure makes it impossible to run the state affairs in a rational manner. Since regions, not policies, distinguish the political parties, the National Assembly has become a forum for emotional confrontations and not one for policy debates. Personnel, budget, projects and all other matters of the nation have been seen in light of regional confrontation and balancing. The principles of efficiency and placing the right person in the right place have been rendered shaky. Even if it is not shaky, trust cannot be maintained.

What is most serious is the fact that the region-based structure divides the people. In every election, politicians have fanned distrust and hostility. In the National Assembly, regional discrimination have been referred to endlessly. Stories about regional political designs and alienations have run endlessly in the media. Suspicion and anger have accumulated in the minds of people in the various regions. No other means are seen a better way to be elected, and politicians continue to incite regional divisiveness. A vicious cycle is repeated continuously. Since distrust and hostility have no reasonable grounds, there is no way to resolve the ensuing frictions. We can go on forever speaking of the damage and unfairness of the biased regional political map.

First of all, we should change the election system. Even though this may not help eliminate regional divisiveness right away, the region-based political structure may be eradicated. And we can break the vicious cycle of politics inciting and escalating frictions.

While all politicians agree that the region-based structure is not right, the election system remains unchanged because that structure has become vested interests for the politicians.

Politicians should take a resolute action. With the structure of friction and division as it is now, we cannot ensure national development. In a national crisis, we cannot respond to it properly. Before trying to seize political power ostensibly for the sake of national development, any aspirants to national leadership should attempt to heal a serious illness of the nation. I earnestly appeal to them

to exhibit the courage and determination to give up vested interests and open a new possibility for the future of the nation.

Fellow citizens,

Economic and social imbalance could become a serious threat to the future of the nation. The gaps across classes and regions, companies in terms of their income and assets, and the information access and opportunities are widening every day. Given the present trend, bipolarization will cause unmanageable frictions and divisions and could even cripple the base for sustainable growth.

The Government has been doing its best and will continue to do so in the future. Its top priority is to manage the economy in a dynamic yet stable manner. The reason is that a sharp turn in the business cycle will further widen the gap and make life even more difficult for needy citizens. The social safety net will be expanded for those in immediate need. Emergency assistance will be expanded and the state will help alleviate the hardships that individuals or households are unable to cope with. Diverse policies have been formulated to improve vocational training and to provide desirable jobs to those who are willing to work. In regard to educational policy, the focus will be on educating world-class manpower and offering fair opportunities to all.

It is hard for the Government to do everything alone. Businesses and the public should altogether pool their wisdom to keep the economy vibrant so that we can all live together well.

Businesses should expand R&D investments. The world market has gained greater vitality as structural uncertainty has increased at the same time. If we are to break through this situation, there is no choice but to expand our market through research and development. Domestic investments should also be expanded. Without a domestic base, it will be hard to score success only on the foreign front. Exports alone cannot ensure continuing growth. The base for domestic consumption should be fostered. That requires the creation of jobs at home. The money earned through exports should be funneled into creating jobs, and domestic businesses should be kept afloat through domestic consumption.

Businesses should have the trained able manpower. It will be hard for businesses to stay competitive in the long run if they are to pick able workers while neglecting to train them. The time has come when competent manpower is viewed as the indicator of competitiveness. We should avoid a vicious cycle in which the number of irregular workers increases, which leads to lower income and lower productivity, which then leads to a reduction in jobs. Neither economy nor businesses can succeed in a society where too many people at their prime are laid off and cannot find jobs. I think it is time for the Government and businesses to proactively develop a management strategy to increase the number of regular workers and to utilize experienced workers to the fullest possible extent.

Labor unions should also take a resolute action now. Under the existing system, it is hard for businesses in trouble to lay off workers, which places irregular workers and a good majority of regular workers at a disadvantage. The labor unions of large corporations, which enjoy job protection thanks to their formidable organizational power, should take resolute actions to give up their vested rights. There must be a sweeping compromise in which labor unions allow flexible lay-off policy while the Government and businesses expand the employment of regular workers and create diverse job opportunities.

The win-win cooperation between large and small companies must bear success without fail. Cooperation of not only business leaders but also workers of large companies are absolutely needed. I look forward to your proactive participation.

Much progress has been made in the pursuit of balanced national development, thanks to the cooperation of businesses, public organizations and local governments. I am truly grateful and look forward to your continued interest and participation.

All these efforts do not spell any immediate gains. Nonetheless, they are to our benefit in the long run. We should look far into the future. We should have a broad vision. Thus far, there has been much thought expended, but we have failed to reach a decision and take an action. A resolute decision is required.

Fellow citizens,

Our people have demonstrated unrivaled competency in creativity and ardor. Our bid to usher in a transparent and fair society has entered into a successful direction. However, we have been less than successful in terms of dialogues, compromises, concessions and cooperation.

Now, we should take a resolute action. If one fails to do so, it is even harder to motivate others to do so, and we cannot expect the world to change. A resolute action will open opportunities. It is the only way both the person taking a resolute action and the rest of us can together carve out a brighter tomorrow.

At every turn in history, we have had a new calling. Under the Japanese colonial rule, the call was to build an independent nation. During the period of industrialization, the call was to eradicate poverty and we fulfilled it. During the 1970s and 1980s, a countless number of young people hit the streets for democratization.

History now gives us another calling. It is none other than putting an end to the history of divisiveness and opening an age of national unity. It is also to build a springboard to overcome the age of national division and usher in a new age of national unification for peace and prosperity. I am going to work with every citizen to carry out that historic mission.

Let us pool our wisdom. Let us make this celebration of the 60th anniversary of national liberation a starting point for true reconciliation and unity.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: bscott@nautilus.org. Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

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