

Korean History: Architect of 1980 Gwangju Massacre, Former Dictator Chun Doo-hwa

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A former mass-murdering dictator notorious for his rule during the [Gwangju Massacre](#) and for his unscrupulous theft from the South Korean people was [granted](#) a diplomatic travel passport from the South Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade on September 18. This news comes from a report issued by Congressional Representative Hong Ik-pyo of the opposition Democratic United Party.

The report says former President Chun Doo-hwan has been given at least four of these five-year passports since 1988. They allow him to travel abroad immune from arrest despite his myriad crimes committed during his dictatorship and still owing South Korea roughly 149 million dollars of the money he stole during his tenure as military dictator between 1980-1988.

His diplomatic status is also notwithstanding his responsibility for [between 200 and 1000 deaths](#) in the military suppression of the Gwangju Democratization Movement in May 1980 (with the explicit approval of the US, of course) as well as the torture and repression of countless citizens opposed to his government.

It is only by the grace of the late former President Kim Dae-jung that Chun is even alive today. After investigations revealed massive corruption during his reign, his administration's guilt for the brutalization of citizens in Gwangju and having declared the coup d'état that brought him to power to be unconstitutional, Chun was sentenced to death in 1996. In 1997 the president at the time, Kim Young-sam, consulted President-elect Kim Dae-jung about the sentence, given that he would soon take power. In an extraordinary act of forgiveness (Kim was a political prisoner for much of the South Korean dictatorship period and also at one time sentenced to death) he exonerated Chun and set him free with a charge to pay back all the money he stole.

To this day Chun is said to have to walk around with a group of private body guards for fear of assassination – some citizens alive during his reign no doubt have long memories of his harsh repression of civil liberties. Would be assassins may also resent the fact that he justified not paying back the money he owed by laughably claiming in a 2003 hearing to only have 250,000 won in total assets (roughly \$240).

How Chun has been able to travel so freely to such countries as Japan and the United States with these supposed financial burdens is one question. Why the South Korean state allows such blatant lawlessness is another. As Rep. Hong said, "He should be banned from leaving the country altogether."

One may also be forgiven for wondering why nations that are said to promote justice

internationally allow him to enter their country at all. Here lies the power of a presidential pardon, where the sins of one man on a countless many can be swept under the rug by simple decree that then becomes respected globally.

One doesn't have to look far for historical parallels of course — only as far as South Korea's "senior ally," the United States. When U.S. President Barack Obama came to power he [said](#) "we need to look forward as opposed to looking backwards," referring to the lawlessness, torture, lies that led to deadly wars and abuses of civil liberties of the previous Bush administration. By doing so he brazenly institutionalized that no President can be justly punished for his or her actions, no matter how terrible, conveniently giving himself carte blanche to commit the [exact same crimes](#), if only less overtly.

Presidential decrees aside, Chun's liberty is guaranteed by another factor as well. It would be very uncomfortable for the United States to put a man like him on trial because it would bring America's role in crushing the democracy movement in Gwangju back to the forefront.

As journalist [Tim Shorrock wrote based on documents he received through the U.S. Freedom of Information Act](#), after officials of the Carter Administration met to determine a response to the Gwangju civilian uprising they decided on repression first, and put off pushing for long term democratic reforms to a vague later date:

"Within hours of the meeting, the US commander in Korea gave formal approval to the Korean military to remove a division of Korean troops under the US-Korean Joint Command and deploy them to Kwangju. The city and its surrounding towns had already been cut off from all communications by a tight military cordon. Military helicopters began flying over the city urging the Kwangju urban army - which had taken up positions in the provincial capital building in the middle of the city - to surrender. At one point, a Kwangju citizens' council asked the US ambassador, William Gleysteen, to intervene [to] seek a negotiated truce; but the request was coldly rejected."

Then American trained Korean soldiers killed Korean citizens in a brilliant demonstration of what American training can do to desensitize soldiers of a nation to murder their own kind. And now Chun is globetrotting freely while his next of kin live comfortably within South Korea on money stolen from their fellow citizens.

This is, of course, a trend for American allied countries. Just as people stood horrified at the [Tiananman Square Massacre](#) in 1989 yet to this day know very little about Gwangju (though the incidents were equal in severity) people howl about the human rights abuses of North Korea, but turn a blind eye to the United State's own crimes. This includes the sanctions placed on Iran and North Korea that [only lead to starvation of the common people](#) and those sanctions that killed [half a million Iraqi](#) children in the 1990's.

The United States now [says it is worried](#) about North Korea starving its population, while forgetting the occupation of Palestine by the Israeli's, who Wikileaks has shown operate with the [specific goal](#) to keep Gaza's economy on the "brink of collapse". It is also in stark contrast of the fact that the Obama administration themselves [brag](#) about how tough the sanctions against Iran are, [though they threaten](#) to kill hundreds of thousands, of regular Iranians.

In this sense, the case of Chun Doo-hwan is not just a curious expression of the South Korean state's cavalier attitude toward justice for its ruling class, but that of all states

everywhere. And they can get away with it as long as they are allied with the superpower at large.

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