

Gwangju: An Overview of the May 18, 1980, Democratic Movement

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Abstract

Forty-five years ago, on an early morning on May 18, 1980, South Korea's democratic movement made a pivotal development on a university's campus in the city of Gwangju. What started as a clash between university students and martial law soldiers turned into an uprising lasting nine days. Men, women, and children came together to protest and fight against the military government. Even though it was suppressed, it is considered to be an important part of the democratic movement in the country. Attempts to diminish its memory and impact included suppression of the people and the press. The military dictatorship of Chun Doo-hwan claimed that the uprising was incited by North Korean agents and rioters. However, what truly happened was preserved to show others how the actions of the people of Gwangju left a permanent mark on South Korea and its democracy. Through various pieces of media and sites like the May 18th National Cemetery, the memory of people who fought for South Korean democracy lives on. With these photos, documents, and historical sites, we can keep the memory of the people and their resistance alive.

Introduction

The Republic of Korea (South Korea), like many of its fellow countries, has had its fair share of uprisings, but one is credited for starting the country's democratic movement, while remaining a sensitive and tragic moment in its history. Despite military forces suppressing the uprising after nine days of fighting, the actions of the Gwangju people have left an everlasting mark on the country. What began as a university student-led protest ended up becoming a city-wide uprising as members from the community came together to stand up to the military regime and martial law. As

South Korea continues to grow as a prominent figure in the East Asian region and world, it is important to look back on this uprising that sparked the democracy it is today.

The Rise of Chun Doo-Hwan and Martial Law

The state of South Korea in the 1970s was improving compared to the previous few decades due to President Park Chung-Hee. In 1961, Chung-Hee seized power in another military coup. For the next eighteen years, he would be South Korea's head of state, bringing the country out of an economic decline (Rhyu, 2005). On October

26, 1979, Chung-Hee was assassinated during a dinner at a safe house near the Blue House compound by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), Kim Jae-Gyu. The president's assassination left a significant power vacuum within the South Korean government, resulting in the head of the Military Security Command, Chun Doo-Hwan, taking power (Kwon, 2023). After taking power, the regime declared martial law in the city of Seoul due to rumors of North Korean personnel infiltrating the country. Late in the evening on May 17, authorities extended martial law to cover the entire country. Troops were stationed at various points in South Korea (Shin & Moon Hwang, 2003). The expansion of martial law included shutting down universities, banning political activities, and censoring the press (Hwang et al., 2022). With this extension, the beginning of the Gwangju Uprising was imminent.

Community, Resistance, and the Uprising

Early in the morning on May 18, outside the gates of Chonnam National University, troops restricted entry into the campus. Students were confused about why the campus was closed, not knowing that the city was under martial law. They were worried about their peers, who stayed on campus overnight and were trapped there, and were not aware that soldiers had taken away students. Eventually, students began to hold protests outside the university, protesting the regime of Doo-Hwan as well as martial law. Not long after, an altercation between a soldier and a student broke out, and soldiers began to attack students who were nearby: The Gwangju Uprising had begun. Soldier brutality against the Gwangju people was a major driving force behind the uprising. Soldiers stationed to suppress the protests began to beat students with batons and use tear gas on them. They started to

take away young men who were in their late teens to early twenties, but soon after, soldiers went after boys who were as young as 10 years old (Ch'oe, 2006). Ultimately, martial law soldiers targeted any man, woman, and child

Up until the Gwangju Uprising, demonstrations and protests primarily consisted of university students. Rarely did anyone else, let alone a whole city, join in these demonstrations due to a persuasive belief that protesting was something that only young adults would do. It was not uncommon to see older Koreans disapprove of what these students were doing. One man was quoted saying, "It's fine to demo on campus, but why are they doing it here...What do they hope to achieve?" (Courtright, 2020). This sentiment was extremely prevalent amongst older generations in South Korea at this time. However, with the Gwangju Uprising, men, women, college students, and some high school students got involved.

What happened in Gwangju the morning of May 18 started with students at Chonnam National University, but unlike other demonstrations or protests, it grew into something more as the community became involved in several ways. Individuals, regardless of age, occupation, and gender, joined in the uprising. People did not even have to join in on the protests to participate: Taxi drivers joined the cause, transporting the wounded to hospitals; women cooked balls of rice and other food for the demonstrators; and during the days when civil order was maintained in the city, people volunteered to clean up the streets of Gwangju or donate blood (Hwang et al., 2022).

Other members of the community used their leadership positions to support the uprising. For example, local officials worked with leaders of the uprising to supply food and water to social welfare

organizations (Ch'oe, 2006). Local leaders created the Citizen Settlement Committee, including business leaders, Catholic priests, clergymen, government officials, lawyers, and professors, on May 20 to negotiate with the military in hopes of ending the uprising as soon as possible (Ch'oe, 2006). On May 27, soldiers re-entered the city and suppressed the demonstrations, resulting in the end of the uprising. Democracy would not begin until long after Chun Doo-Hwan's presidency. Only after another movement in 1987, the June Democratic Struggle Movement, would democracy be introduced in South Korea (Korean Culture and Information Service [KOCIS]).

Gwangju: The City of Light and Human Rights

In May 1997, South Korea commemorated the Gwangju Uprising as a national holiday known as May 18th Democratic Movement Day. Officials moved the victims' remains to the May 18th National Cemetery. The government built the 5·18 Memorial Park as a tribute to democracy and those who participated in the uprising. Today, the Gwangju Uprising is referred to in a variety of ways. Most people in South Korea refer to it as May 18th, 5·18, or the May 18th Democratic Movement. Outside of South Korea, it is more common to hear it being referred to as the “Gwangju Uprising.” What happened in Gwangju has been memorialized in several ways. There are books and films about or that take place during the uprising. One of the most well-known movies is *A Taxi Driver* (2017) about a taxi driver who helped a German journalist named Jürgen Hinzpeter sneak into the city to capture the events taking place. Even though it is an action and comedy movie, it still depicts the struggle that the Gwangju citizens experienced and

of the foreign journalist who was able to show the world what was happening in Gwangju.

One of the most well-known books about the uprising is *Human Acts* by Han Kang. Born in Gwangju in 1970, [한강] Kang wrote the book with the hope of providing readers with an understanding of what happened in May of 1980 (Yonhap, 2024). On October 10, 2024, Kang won the Nobel Prize in Literature for the book as it “confronts historical traumas and exposes the fragility of human life” (Niemann et al., 2024, para. 1). She is the first South Korean and Asian woman to win this award (Niemann et al., 2024).

The events that occurred in Gwangju echo throughout the city and country. In the city, there are markers indicating where an event during the uprising occurred. There is one outside of the main gate at Chonnam National University and another outside of the May 18th National Archives. Museums like the May 18th National Archives and the Jeonil 245 Building contain documents and items as reminders of what happened. The Jeonil 245 building still has bullet holes in the walls that visitors can see from both inside and outside the building.

Conclusion

Over forty years after the uprising, there is only so much that we know. Organizations like the May 18 Foundation were founded to commemorate what happened, while other organizations and institutions like Chonnam National University and Chosun University helped to continue research and learning on the uprising. Given the current state of politics in places like the Republic of Korea, we must continue to look back at and learn from the events that took place in Gwangju and the people who made them happen.

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Recommended Citation

Helfrich, D. (2025). Gwangju: An overview of the May 18, 1980, democratic movement. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>