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POLITICAL TRENDS #17

At the week's close, the parties of the Left were in a tragic condition, with every apparent indication that their full retreat might well become a rout. The visit of the Russians, to which they had looked forward with eager anticipation, was, ironically, one of the factors in consolidating the hostile public reaction.

The evidence of Leftist confusion had multiplied during the course of the period in review. LYUH, Wung Heung, titular head of the People's Party, was one of the first to sense the barometer's drop, and he had scurried to the storm shelter. LYUH had not been, nominally at least, a member of the Communist Party. The discipline of the Left rested upon him sufficiently lightly to permit him to make the initial overt break from the pro-Trusteeship front of the Left. He issued a rather remarkable statement, -- a statement which could have come only from an Oriental politician.

In substance, LYUH's statement was; "It is the leaders' fault that our brethren are disunited on the question of Trusteeship. Among the leaders, I am most responsible, I did not rightly recognize the desires of our brethren." In an excess of penitential zeal, LYUH, Wung Heung had beaten his breast, going on to say, "It is an unconscionable and a shameful thing to begin a difficult task beyond the reach of one's ability and aspirations. It was because of my egotism that I plunged into the political picture.....I do not really wish Trusteeship.....I had been thirty or forty years away from home, and I no longer knew the people's mind." His statement concluded with a pious plea for forgiveness, -- "A leader may hope to be forgiven, if he criticizes himself severely."

LYUH's retreat appears to have caught his own party unprepared. They fumbled for two days, pondering a reply to the statement of the leader. While their enemies gleefully hailed it as "the confession of a traitor", they weighed out their official party attitude. They apparently reached the conclusion that LYUH's own personal following, inherited from the old revolutionary days, must still be valued. They did not read him out of the party. But the answer that they made, when it came, was a pathetic effort, that revealed the difficulty of their position. They pledged renewed confidence in his leadership, and added that they did not regard his statement as having been a retreat from their previous viewpoint.

At this most unpropitious time, the PAK bombshell burst, the morning of 15 January. PAK, Heung Yong, leader of the Communist Party, had previously been interviewed by a group of foreign correspondents, including RICHARD JOHNSTON of the NEW YORK TIMES. Now, from the San Francisco radio, came JOHNSTON's report, that PAK had advocated the ultimate admission of Korea as a component member of the Soviet Union. No one was surprised to learn that this was the ultimate objective of PAK or of any other orthodox Stalinist, in Korea or elsewhere, but many people who know PAK as an astute politician doubt that he made such a statement. The universal outcry of rage that greeted the report must have surprised even the Communists, in its volume and intensity. Their period of deliberation was very short. By the following day, they were ready with their own denials and denunciations. The denials, when made, were vigorous and unqualified, but they were scarcely heard in the clamor. To the mind of all but the most devout of the party faithful, the mask was off.

A visible flood of indignation and violent intent mounted. PAK went into hiding, a prudent act, since it was reliably reported that his enemies had placed a price of 300,000 yen upon his head. Even in inflation, 300,000 yen was a figure to stir the cupidity of many. PAK's radio speech of denial was made by proxy.

-1-

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This radio speech itself became a storm center of controversy, before the proxy delivered it. A delegation representing some fifty groups had called upon the Public Information Section in Military Government to forbid the radio to PAK or other traitors. References to Voltaire had fallen upon deaf ears. The delegation had left, unreconciled, and predicting that any newspaper that dared to print the speech would be courting disaster.

The warning was remembered at week's end, when the violent demonstrations of Friday night included the wrecking of the plant of CHOSEN INMIN PO.

From 16 January on, reports grew in volume, that HU, Hun had resigned as head of the People's Republic. This was the one last ingredient needed to complete the picture of dismay and demoralization on the Left. It is still impossible to verify the report officially, but spokesmen for the People's Republic appear to lack strength in their denials. In the main, their position is that the report is still only unofficial.

In the wisdom of afterthought, it was easy to observe that the weaknesses of the Left's position had been there all along. Fundamentally, they had been faced with an impossible task. Regardless of what might be thought of Communism as an isolated philosophy, as an organized political force it remains inseparable from the international aspirations of the Soviet Union. In essence, therefore, it had been the difficult task of Stalin's followers to make the idea of Russian dominance popular with the Koreans. That, it was apparent, was too Herculean a task for even their tireless efforts. Korean acquaintance with Russian contacts, from the eighteen-nineties down to the present day, had been too unpleasant, and the national awareness of this had penetrated too deeply, even among the other wise non-politically-minded peasantry.

It had taken the Moscow decisions to precipitate the chemical solution, and to start separating out the elements. Granting that the demonstrations had been encouraged and not wholly spontaneous, the fact remained that they had represented the very genuine reaction of the overwhelming mass of the Korean people.

The reasons for this adverse attitude were not hard to analyze. DONG A ILBO spoke the national mind when it said, "Though (we are) poor and miserable materially on account of Japanese exploitation, we have a unique history and culture, superior abilities and noble desires."

The Korean is a proud person; he regards his culture as unique and advanced; he is self-confident; he knows still comparatively little of the outside world; and he has a vast and very genuine sense of nationalism, forced into hot-house growth by the four decades of Japanese oppression.

For the agents of the Comintern to have believed that these people were ripe to trade in their newly-won national identity, for a bit role in the Soviet's international drama, had been a monstrous error of judgment. And the Communist Party had erred severely, in assuming that it could safely defy the public feeling, instead of trying to ride with it. In their defiance, they had merely sped the education of the Koreans to the political truth that a loyal Communist follows the Moscow line first, and his own beliefs and his country's interests but second.

As for the conservatives, they continued to make capital of the situation, but their opposition to Trusteeship had calmed down to a more rational tone, as illustrated by the words of the National Committee for anti-Trusteeship, which spoke of the "misplaced kindness of the powers."

At this stage of developments, it would appear to be of value to devote a passing thought to the interesting position of the People's Republic.

-2-

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In the immediate past, it has been too easy, and too incorrect, to write this off as a mere adjunct of Communist policy. This has not been the case. Nor could it ever have been accurately regarded, as it has been by some commentators, as "a product of the union of the People's Party and a group of other smaller parties." The actual status of the People's Republic is far more complex than that, and understanding it involves knowledge of the "transmission-belt" principle of Communist operation. The system had its inception in the middle thirties, in the time of the Popular Front movements, in Europe. It involved then, and it involves now, the practice of infiltration by trained agents into larger groups, whose members do not agree with all the party principles, but who can be induced to go along on a lesser program of common objectives, to be extended when and as possible.

The chaotic conditions that accompanied the collapse of Japanese power, last August, provided an ideal situation for the application of this technique. The People's Republic, on its lower levels of organization, grew in part spontaneously, in part under Japanese direction, in part under frankly Communist control, and in part under conservative auspices. It must not be forgotten that in many places the new groups moved into a virtual governmental vacuum. Previously-existing social or revolutionary committees, or farmers' organizations, moved in full into the functions of local government, and became units of the People's Republic.

The People's Party, --- not identical with the People's Republic, though frequently hard to distinguish, -- was created by Communist organizers, to take into membership a wider group than could be responsive to the appeal of the Communist Party itself. It was designed to provide the intermediate transmission wheel by which the whole machinery of the People's Republic would be controlled, since it was believed that most of the local members of committees could be induced to join the People's Party, and would thereby be led into the minimum program of Communist collaboration.

In this elaborate plan, temporarily highly successful, it can be seen why it was essential that the People's Republic itself remain, in theory, totally non-partisan. This fact accounts for the willingness, -- even the anxiety -- of the Communists, in the early days, to have some well-known conservatives affiliated with the People's Republic.

The motive of the Japanese in entrusting local control largely to known Leftists has been, during five months, a subject of partisan debate. The Left maintains that the Japanese, afraid, wanted to place responsibility where they knew the power lay. The Right insists that the motive was to make Korean unity and progress impossible.

Whatever the past successes, and whatever the Japanese motives, the elaborate fabric appears now in process of being ripped asunder. At this phase of its evolution, it appears most probable that the People's Republic is foundering on the rocks of the Russian question. The organism may either slide from under the dominance of the Communist Party, or atrophy under the impossible burden of carrying the Communists with it. In many places, its regional units are likely to gravitate, as units, under the influence of KIM, Koo and his followers.

It remains then to consider what sources of strength the Left still does possess. First among them is the belief, held by many, that American interest in Korea will decline as the war recedes in memory, and that as the Americans withdraw, the Russians will be in on their heels. The sense of the fearful inevitability of Russian overlordship preoccupies many, and leads a part of them to the belief that it will be properly arrayed in the bridal garments.

There is an awareness of the fact that to oppose the American program does not involve the same lethal personal possibilities as are implicit in opposition to the program of the Northern Colossus.

-3-

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A basis of remaining Leftist appeal is dissatisfaction over food, tied into the chaotic financial situation, the reasons for which many Koreans find it hard to comprehend. Many people, not only of the lowest classes, are repeating the plaint, "We used to have more food, even though we had to give half of it to the Japanese."

Another source of what appeal the Left still makes, to intellectuals, despite its liabilities, will be found in the attitude of the Right. The conservative leaders appear to believe that they are coming into power. But thus far they give scant evidence that they realize that power carries compensating responsibilities.

The prevailing thought of an uncomfortably large segment of the Right can well be quoted in the words of an enthusiastic young democrat, this week, "Here (in this room) we are all good Democrats, and when we have cut off the Communists's heads, this will be a good democratic country."

There is still an almost universal inability to see anything but incarnate evil in political disagreement, -- still a willingness to identify opposition to one's party program with treason to one's state. There is still much lip service to the ideal of party unity, but the unity that is meant is the unity of enforced agreement. There is complete unawareness of the salutary effect of divergence of thought within the body politic. There is no comprehension of the legitimate rights of opposition parties.

Nowhere is this uncompromising spirit more apparent than in the frequent statements of CHO, So Ang, who is a rising power in the Provisional Government, and is more and more commonly accepted as its spokesman..... "Even if we cannot compromise in our policy, our normal power will be able to unite the country."

CHO, So Ang, it may be conjectured, may well regard himself as the coming Robespierre of the Right. His intransigent attitude is increasingly becoming the position of the Provisional Government. In the course of the week, culled from his numerous statements were the following expressions; "The Provisional Government intends to take its own measures to establish the government. We believe that this government will obtain international support." "We have been too busy to discuss party unification." "Neither the Provisional Government, nor any good citizens, will cooperate with any government that may be set up under a trusteeship."

In this connection will be read the persistent reports (unverified) that SHIN, Ik Hi, Interior Minister of the Provisional Government, is again trying to extend his authority over the police.

As the third week of 1946 ended, party unification was a dying, if not a wholly dead, cause.

Nonetheless, meetings were still being held in its name, -- the most important of them being held today, 20th January, in SEOUL, under the egis of the Provisional Government. To their session, they have invited representation of some twenty-five groups and parties, including the Communist and People's Parties, and including also Koreans residing in China and the United States. One delegate is invited from each group named, and since the list is well padded with subordinate or at least friendly groups, it appears most probable that the Left will have declined to send its invited agents. The meeting is designed to give the erring brothers a last chance to come home on the terms of the Provisional Government. Their refusal to attend, or their refusal to agree if they attend, will be taken as the last wilful denial of grace, cutting them off from the unification, which will then be expected to proceed without them.

Actual unification of parties is out of the realm of possibility at the present, but consolidation of the Right proceeds. A beneficiary of the movement of events may be Dr. RHEE, Syngman, who has always opposed the efforts to find a modus vivendi with the Communists, and who now finds his viewpoint increasingly popular.

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Only passing mention is due to the newcomer in the party field, which made its bow in the radio speech of the founder, 18 January. The People's Democratic Party (MIN CHOONG DONG), brain-child of LEE, Chong Heong, appears to regard itself as vaguely right of center. It criticizes the Communists, in that they are false followers of Lenin. (This charge is left undocumented.) At this writing, it may be judged that the People's Democratic Party will acquire no great following.

Rightist sentiment is now fairly well solidified into three principal parties, all giving varying measures of support to the Provisional Government, but all withholding from it their unqualified allegiance. This withholding is due in part to the refusal of the Military Government to allow the Provisional Government to claim recognition as a government; it is due in part also to a degree of personal ambition in the various leaders. This is apparent in the varying approaches of the three, to the question of the interim government possibly to be established by the Russian-American conferences.

The New Korean Nationalist (Racialist) Party of LEE, Kap Sung shows least concern for the direct continuity of the new government-to-be, from the Provisional Government. The Korean Democratic Party has resolved that the powers "should establish a new government, based on the Provisional Government." And AN, Cho Hong, speaking for his Nationalists, says that in the new set-up, "the choice of personalities is important, but it is best that the new interim government should succeed to the orthodoxy of (KIM, Koo's) government."

AHN, Chai Hong appears to be most concerned of the party leaders in trying to keep his group in a middle-of-the-road position.

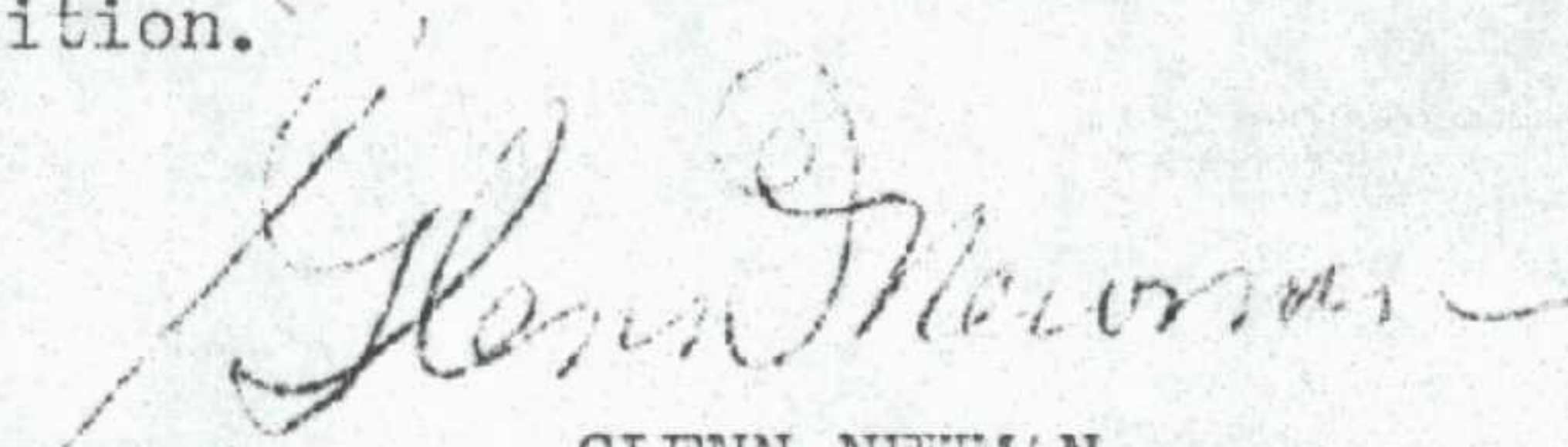
In the general picture, which is one of clarification and growing distinction between right and left, there are items which stand out as at variance with the over-all pattern. Thus, the conservative group have spawned an offspring bearing the somewhat surprising title "Revolutionary Workers' Party of Korea." On the other hand, the local press reports various gifts of money, by members of the Democratic Party, to the Preparatory Association for the National Army, a Communist-fathered strong-arm group, now under the ban of Military Government.

Many of the aspects of Korean politics remain bizarre and baffling to the foreign observer. So numerous have been the ceremonial gifts of blood-writings pledging loyalty or vowing revenge, as to inspire in one observer the irreverent comment that a good copious nosebleed can constitute a political asset of magnitude.

As an indication to the peoples susceptibility to wild rumors the review of the week is not complete without the additional mention of the belief, which gained wide temporary currency, that Secretary Patterson had been sent to Korea because of Washington's fear that no agreement could be reached with the Russians, in which event he was empowered to make a declaration of war and lead the American Army into Manchuria.

On the favorable side of the picture, must be stated the zealous actions of the Korean police, in the disturbances of Friday night. Despite the fact that many of them must certainly have been friendly to the aspirations of the Student Alliance Association, they went loyally into combat, and successfully apprehended over a hundred of the rioters. The incident may be taken as one indication of a beginning of a sense of duty to the state, rising above partisan predilections.

To conclude the narrative, it may be said truly that neither side wants general bloodshed, each fears it, and each is preparing for it, -- and unquestionably each looks forward hopefully to at least a little unilateral shedding of the blood of the traitorous opposition.



GLENN NEWMAN
Colonel, CAC
Secretary of
Public Information Section

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-5-

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