

Observation no: 107

Country-year: 1949

1. Did the current regime come to power in a military coup?

No.

Syngman Rhee was placed in charge of the provisional Korean state by the United States after the end of World War II. After leading the provisional government, he was elected President of the Republic of Korea in 1948 with 93% of the popular vote.

2. Has the country ever experienced a military coup?

No.

There were no military coups in the Republic of Korea since its establishment in 1948 until 1949. During this time, the provisional government, the United States, and Syngman Rhee controlled governance in the new nation.

3. Is the country's top leader a former military officer?

No.

Syngman Rhee was a career politician and scholar with no experience in the military.

4. Is the military officer corps largely closed to those who do not share the leader's ethnic or sectarian background?

No.

Though Rhee had favorite demographics within the officer corps—generally younger, less likely to be affiliated with the Chinese—I could find no evidence of clear ethnic or sectarian restrictions to the officer corps.¹

5. Are there strict ideological requirements for entry into the senior officer corps?

No.

¹ Robert K. Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: K MAG in Peace and War*, (Washington: Department of the Army, 1962).

Loyalty to the regime was paramount for entry into the senior officer corps, but no strict ideology was required.²

6. Is party membership required for entry into the senior officer corps?

Yes.

Syngman Rhee required that senior officers not only support the Liberal party in membership, but also to force their units to vote for the Liberal party and to contribute to Liberal party campaigns.³

7. Does military training involve extensive political education or ideological indoctrination?

No.

I could find no evidence of extensive political or ideological indoctrination within military training. Though there was no doubt a strong anti-Communist and nationalistic bent from both the ROK government and from American military advisors, the training at this period appeared to be so disorganized and nascent that there was little codified ideological training within the military education and training process.⁴

8. Has the military been used to repress internal dissent in the last five years?

Yes.

The U.S. military and portions of the Korean constabulary force was used to put down a revolt in Daegu in 1946. Additionally, the American military utilized a counter intelligence unit in Korea that focused on putting down and gaining information about civil uprisings in South Korea.⁵ Shortly after the Americans relinquished control to the Rhee regime, the ROK Army was used to put down a rebellion by the ROK 14th Regiment, which had begun a mutiny after Communist

² Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*.

³ Jon Huer, *Marching Orders: The Role of the Military in South Korea's 'Economic Miracle,' 1961-1971*, (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), pg. 13.

⁴ Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*; John P. Lovell, "The Military and Politics in Postwar Korea," Edward R. Wright, ed., *Korean Politics in Transition* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975).

⁵ Davis, Richard G., ed. *US Army and Irregular Warfare 1775-2007: Selected Papers From the 2007 Conference of Army Historians: Selected Papers From the 2007 Conference of Army Historians*. Vol. 70. Government Printing Office, 2010, pg. 218.

non-commissioned officers rebelled against the new South Korean leadership.⁶ In 1949, a full 60% of the ROK budget was earmarked for these military campaigns against internal dissent and in the last of 1949, the ROK army conducted 542 counterguerilla actions.⁷

9. Has the military been used to govern the country in the last five years.

Yes.

The Republic of Korea was governed by the United States military from the end of World War II until the creation of the official state in 1948.⁸

10. Is there a paramilitary organization separate from the regular military, used to provide regime or leader security?

No.

Though the ROK government had a large police force and a youth movement which they overtly supported, I could find no evidence of a distinct paramilitary group used to provide the regime security.

11. Is there an internal intelligence apparatus dedicated to watching the regular military?

Yes.

With the help of a Korean army officer, Kim Chang-Ryong, Syngman Rhee formed the Counter Intelligence Corps. The organization's responsibility was to seek out and punish members of the Armed Forces who were disloyal to the Rhee regime.

12. Has a purge of the officer corps occurred in the last five years?

Yes.

In 1948, after the mutiny of the 14th Regiment, the ROK government and American military advisors purged the Constabulary (preliminary ROK military) of 180 Communist-leaning officers and over 1,000 enlisted service members.⁹

⁶ Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAG in Peace and War*, pg. 39.

⁷ Lovell, "The Military and Politics in Postwar Korea," pg. 164.

⁸ Donald Stone Macdonald, *The Koreans: Contemporary Politics and Society*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), pg. 45.

13. Is there an institutionalized forum through which civilian leaders and military officers regularly exchange information?

No.

I could find no evidence of an institutionalized forum. Newspaper clippings from 1948 and 1949 included references to “emergency cabinet” meetings in response to domestic and North Korean crises, which seems to imply that there was no existing mechanism for exchanging information between the military and civilian leaders.

⁹ Sawyer, *Military Advisors in Korea: KMAC in Peace and War*, pg. 40; Lovell, “The Military and Politics in Postwar Korea,” pg. 163.