

## HUMAN RIGHTS: KOREA

### ISSUE

The human rights situation in the Republic of Korea has improved in 1987 with the announcement by the government of major concessions to the opposition.

### BACKGROUND

Western concepts of human rights and democratic government are largely alien to Korea's political and legal traditions, which are imbued with the ethos of Confucianism. It was only in 1948 that South Korean Constitution first included references to human rights and democratic traditions. Since then, succeeding Korean leaders have permitted civil liberties to be exercised only to the extent that their power or the security of the nation were not jeopardized.

In 1987, the domestic political scene was dominated by events associated with the government's plans for effecting the transition of power from President Chun. In early 1987, there were more persons in jail for political reasons than at any time since the Korean war. Human rights issues stimulated high levels of anti-government dissent early in the year. In a dramatic move in late June, DJP Chairman Roh Tae Woo obtained President Chun's agreement to concede to almost the complete list of longstanding opposition demands, including its call for direct and free elections, freedom of the press, the release of political prisoners and the relaxation of laws restricting labour activities.

The government released in early July over 500 detainees held as a result of their participation in anti-government demonstrations or convicted of having committed offenses under the National Security Law and other decrees prior to the June disturbances. The government also announced the pardon and the restoration of civil rights of Kim Dae June and 2,334 other political offenders.

The government's moderation this summer has been replaced by a gradual tightening of restrictions and a series of new arrests as the Presidential election approached. Most arrests were allegedly related to violent acts committed during the Presidential campaign. It was not clear at the time of writing whether these prisoners would be released after the elections.

A Presidential election will not be the panacea to human rights abuses in Korea. A legal apparatus exists which provides the government with very important powers. The National Security Law, the Public Security Law, the Law on Assemblies and Demonstrations, the Minor Offenses Punishment Act and the Code of Criminal can be