

How South Korea's Pro-Democracy Movement Fought to Ban "Murderous Tear Gas"

Thursday 3 June 2021, by [BALHORN Max](#) (Date first published: 28 June 2020).

In 1980s South Korea, hundreds of protesters were maimed and blinded by tear gas grenades fired by police. But the demand to stop the state's use of tear gas soon itself became the focus of protests — a fight against police brutality which rallied millions of South Koreans behind the pro-democracy movement.

A stinging feeling in the eyes was a fact of everyday life in the cities of 1980s South Korea. As the repressed details of the 1980 [Gwangju massacre](#) began to reach public attention, clashes between Molotov cocktail-wielding demonstrators and riot cops became part of the urban scenery. Students fought police in battles over the regime's ties to the United States, workers' rights, and the suppression of democracy itself.

For military dictator Chun Doo-hwan, the fear was that such a heightened atmosphere of tension might jeopardize Seoul's status as host city for the 1988 Olympic Games — and put up barriers to his liberalization of South Korea's developmental state structure. Seeking to quell the unrest in the streets, he ordered riot police to deploy increasing volumes of one of their key weapons, tear gas.

The situation came to a head in June 1987, as a coalition of Christian associations, civil organizations, and student activists known as the National Council for the Democratic Constitution called for massive street protests demanding constitutional reform and the removal of the military dictatorship. During this month alone, over 670,000 canisters of tear gas were fired at demonstrators — more than all the tear gas fired between 1980 and 1985.

During South Koreans' protracted struggle for democracy throughout the 1980s, demonstrators were exposed to consistent, high doses of tear gas. And as street clashes increased, demands to cease the riot police's use of tear gas itself became a central demand of the democratization movement. Addressing the public in an anti-tear gas handout from June 1987, one activist put it this way: "We have become the subjects of a clinical trial on the toxic effects of tear gas being performed in the streets, the results of which very well could be fatal."

Demonstrators had reason to be afraid. The majority of tear gas used on South Korean streets was produced domestically and had a reputation for being particularly damaging. Writing in an internal church communique, Reverend Bebb Wheeler Stone stated: "Unlike tear gas in the United States, which is formulated to dissipate in a few hours, Korean tear gas lingers for days. In the areas where the tear gas was heavily used, the insects are dead, the birds have fled, and the trees are dying. No one knows what chemicals have been sprayed on these Korean youth."

Despite the public's demand for the government to disclose the contents of domestically produced tear gas — thus enabling doctors to administer more effective treatments — the administration

resisted such pressure. When five doctors from the Harvard School of Public Health traveled to Seoul to study the contents of the tear gas, the authorities similarly refused to cooperate. As a result, it was up to citizens to share information amongst themselves in order to mitigate the awful burns, lesions, swelling, rashes, and eye problems inflicted on both demonstrators and those living in proximity to universities and other heavily tear gassed areas. Citing tactics learned from the radical science movement the British Society for Social Responsibility in Science, women organizers advised demonstrators to smear a mixture of egg and soda water on their faces — or place vinegar-soaked rags in their face coverings.

In South Korea, massive social upheaval has often been sparked by authorities' attempts to cover up acts of atrocious violence. In 1960, the student Kim Joo-yeol was discovered floating in the ocean with a tear gas canister lodged in his head 27 days after he had gone missing, igniting the April Revolution which ousted president Syngman Rhee. The movement against tear gas built on decades of mistrust of government authorities and the desire to hold them accountable for the violence they inflicted on citizens — something which could only be achieved through a wider fight for democracy.

Injuries Mount

Even before the mass protests in June 1987, which brought millions into the streets, knowledge of the police use of tear gas had spread widely among the population. Just as citizens had their own verbiage for the white helmet-clad riot police, which they called the "[White Skull Corps](#)," people also gave names to the variety of tear gas canisters.

Officially known as KM-25, so-called "apple grenades" were thrown by hand and released shrapnel upon exploding, occasionally blinding protesters. In many instances, protesters showed up at hospitals with dozens of shards embedded in their bodies. Cylindrical SY-44 canisters were known as "can grenades" as they resembled soup cans and could be loaded into and fired from guns. Although SY-44 canisters were meant to be fired at a 45-degree angle over the heads of protesters, demonstrators accused riot police of routinely aiming them directly at protestors, causing skull fractures and other serious injuries. Most infamous were what protesters termed "freak out grenades," which spun erratically, sending tear gas in all directions.

Christian organizations were at the center of anti-tear gas mobilizations and worked to both collect and publicize incidents of death and injury from tear gas. One document estimates that by August 1987, over 670 individuals had been seriously injured by tear gas. Injuries included brain damage, missing fingers, blindness, miscarriages, skin diseases, and broken bones.

One of the first instances of serious injury caused by tear gas occurred in October 1984, when twenty-five-year-old Im Jin-su was struck by a canister in the back of the head while returning home from a rally for the Cheonggye Garment Workers' Union. The blow caved in one fourth of his skull. As he recalled, "I was running away, and at the moment I looked back I got smacked in the head, and blood started flowing everywhere. I felt like my head had been split in half." He eventually had a plastic plate fitted into his head where his skull was missing.

In November of that same year, police used jackhammers to drill through a brick wall and arrest student activists occupying the headquarters of the ruling party. Police fired tear gas indiscriminately into the closed-off room occupied by students, suffocating them in a thick fog of toxic gas. Sungkyunkwan University student Baek Chung-yong inhaled a large amount of gas, which caused his kidneys to fail. He survived only thanks to a kidney transplant from his father.

As anger over incidents of serious injuries from tear gas mounted, an awareness began to grow among students that the indiscriminate use of tear gas would not end until power was wrestled from

the military dictatorship. As one activist group stated during the June protests: “Tear gas is a weapon of repression that the military dictatorship and its friends cannot afford to give up. If they don’t have tear gas, they will have to use guns and artillery to put down our fervor for democracy. So, the true banishment of tear gas can only happen when we secure a world where all citizens are able to live like human beings.”

An Anti-Tear Gas Movement Grows

The first groups to actively organize around anti-tear gas measures were women’s Christian associations and early South Korean environmentalists. The turning point came on June 9, 1987, when Yonsei University student Lee Han-yeol was struck in the head by a SY-44 tear gas canister during a confrontation between students and riot police outside Yonsei University. A photo of his bloodied body being carried away by a friend was captured by Reuters photographer Jeong Tae-won.

The picture was soon published in the *JoongAng Daily*, sparking outrage across the country. His image served to symbolize the righteous indignation of the people in the face of police violence. Never regaining consciousness, Lee Han-yeol lay in the hospital for nearly a month before his death on July 5. His [funeral](#) in Seoul was attended by 1 million people.

As anger grew over the use of tear gas, a coalition including the Korea Church Women United, Korea Women’s Associations United, and the Citizens’ Anti-Pollution Movement Association organized a campaign specifically targeting the use of tear gas and the corporations producing it. In leaflets and small booklets distributed by the movement, women organizers placed blame for Lee Han-yeol’s grave injury on the “wicked” CEOs of Korean corporations who were getting rich off the repression of the people’s democratic rights. Activist literature called out the CEOs of Sam Yang Chemicals and Korean Chemicals by name. It even provided the addresses of their offices, accusing them of “growing their companies within a tear gas cloud of death” while also urging citizens to boycott products produced by their subsidiaries.

Social Welfare, Not “Murderous” Tear Gas

Movement organizers were also keen to expose what a waste of public funds it was to spend so much on arming the police. One publication stressed that between 1980 and 1987, nearly 26 billion won had been spent on tear gas, leading activists to claim that South Korea had the “dishonorable distinction” of using more tear gas than any other country. For comparison, the total 1987 budget for the Ministry of Health and Welfare was approximately 940 billion won. Emphasizing the cost for ordinary people, activists highlighted that a single tear gas canister cost equal to a thousand cloves of garlic, two hundred public transport tokens, or one and half straw sacks of potatoes.

An anti-tear gas organization based in Gwangju — site of a massacre in 1980 in which nearly two hundred people died when they armed themselves in defiance of Chun Doo-hwan’s coup — similarly called for the dissolution of the riot police, damned for treating “the people as the enemy.” They underscored their demands, stating: “When we say pay the debts of farmers, you scream ‘there isn’t money for that.’ When we say raise the wages of workers, you say ‘we have to keep inflation down.’ You bastards who tear down shanty houses like there is no tomorrow! With all the tens of billions of won of tear gas being blasted on the street, how can you say there is no money to pay for social welfare and the livelihoods of the people?”

Echoing these demands, the Anti-Pollution Movement Youth Council demanded that the country first take care of students who couldn’t afford the paltry tuition fee for school and the urban poor forced out of their homes onto the streets by urban development. Indeed, movement organizers repeatedly spoke to the everyday difficulties of citizens, demanding that money for the riot police be redirected

to provide citizens with the most basic of life's necessities.

June 18, 1987 and the "Day Against Tear Gas"

Under the leadership of the National Council for the Democratic Constitution, social movements from across the country united in a final struggle to win constitutional reform and the removal of the military dictatorship. Coinciding with the [first day of protests](#) on June 10, held to demand the truth concerning Park Jong-cheol's death in police custody months early, the Korea Church Women United held their first anti-tear gas rally in front of Dongbang Plaza in Seoul. However, the rally was quickly broken up by volleys of tear gas.

This experience only hardened their resolve, and the same day they established the Center for Reporting Injuries from Tear Gas in order to collect incidences of police brutality and help organize victims. Two days later, on June 12, fifty members of the Korea Church Women United held another rally with placards which read "Don't Use Our Tax Money to Kill Our Sons" while passing out literature and demanding the end of the use of tear gas.

The sheer frequency of injuries from tear gas bought a surge of attention to the issue. In Seoul on June 10, a tear gas canister fired by police smashed through a city bus window, filling the vehicle with tear gas. The bus was turned into a "living hell" with people coughing and retching. The image of a mother holding her young child while screaming "Please, save my baby!" was captured by a photographer; the distressing photo was subsequently printed on leaflets calling for the end of the military dictatorship.

Political leaflets repeatedly referred to tear gas as the military dictatorship's final means for holding on to power. In short time, anti-tear gas rhetoric had taken center stage at pro-democracy rallies. Feminist and human rights activist Lee U-jeong, who was both a lead organizer for the women's Christians organizations spearheading anti-tear gas rallies and a delegate for the National Coalition for a Democratic Constitution, suggested that an anti-tear gas rally be held on June 18. Lee U-jeong argued that whereas some citizens might be apprehensive about coming into the streets for a rally calling for the overthrow of the government, they would be more likely to support a rally against tear gas.

The National Coalition for a Democratic Constitution listened to Lee U-jeong's reasoning, and declared June 18 a "Day Against Tear Gas." Leaflets handed out for the rally appealed to the memory of Lee Han-yeol, who was still fighting for his life in hospital while urging students and citizens to join, writing: "When our lovely friend is slowly dying and going cold after being hit by a tear gas grenade, the place that a student needs to be is clearly not the library. When this country's most righteous individuals are suffering in prison, no citizen can sit in silence. When the sacred land of our peninsula is being ripped to shreds by the force of the dictatorship, the place where all 40 million of us need to be is the battlefield."

As George Katsiaficas details in [Asia's Unknown Uprisings](#), the [June 18 rally](#) was a smashing success, with over 1 million South Koreans filling the streets demanding an end to police brutality and the military dictatorship. Sensing that the end was near, Chun Doo-hwan considered declaring martial law and mobilizing troops to violently put down protests, but he relented at the urging of United States officials who were worried about the potential fallout. By June 26, protests had erupted in smaller cities which had seen little unrest — proving to authorities that they had no way out of the crisis. On June 29, the government agreed to direct presidential elections, the [release of political prisoners](#), expanded civil rights, and other progressive reforms granting expanded autonomy to universities, the press, and local governments.

Even after the June democracy movement, tear gas continued to be used heavily. In particular, following the exit of middle class protesters from the streets, tear gas was used to repress the wave of [workers' protests](#) that followed the June 29 declaration, resulting in serious injuries and more deaths. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung, a long-term democracy activist and frequent political prisoner, was elected president. That same year, he declared that tear gas would no longer be used to suppress protests. However, in 2011 water cannons spraying water containing tear gas agents were introduced as a new technique for dominating the streets. What's more, as [Anna Feigenbaum](#) details, South Korean companies are involved in selling riot-control gear and tear gas to Southeast Asian and African governments, aiding authoritarian governments in sustaining control over oppressed populations.

On its own terms, the movement to banish tear gas which arose out of women's movements and early Korean environmental activism achieved only limited success — and did not secure the total ban campaigners had sought. But what is clear is that their demands to reinvest police funding in social welfare and end police brutality against citizens succeeded in building the pro-democracy movement as a whole.

The fight against police brutality brought otherwise reluctant bystanders into the movement and rallied public support behind the students battling the forces of repression. Ultimately, it proved decisive in creating the critical mass necessary to topple the military dictatorship.

Max Balhorn is a PhD student at Chung-Ang University in Seoul, where he is researching South Korean environmental history in the postwar era.

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Jacobin Magazine

<https://www.jacobinmag.com/2020/06/south-korea-democracy-movement-protests-tear-gas>