

Kim Dae-jung: From Prison to President



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South Korean President Kim Dae-jung endured a run-in with a 14-ton truck, a kidnapping, repeated arrests, beatings, exile and a death sentence during his decades-long struggle as an opposition leader. After losing three election bids for president, he came back from retirement to finally win the office at age 72, pledging major democratic reforms. He is

sometimes referred to as "the Nelson Mandela of Asia."

Profile of President Kim Dae Jung.

Born into modest circumstances nearly 73 years ago, when Korea was still under Japanese rule, Kim started a shipping company as a young man, which quickly made him a fortune. He entered politics in the 1950's as an opposition figure. After ten years in the national assembly, Kim ran for president in 1971. His passionate speeches made him a popular candidate, and he narrowly lost the election.

A few years later, Kim was kidnapped by South Korean intelligence police while he was staying in Japan. He was put on a ship and tied to concrete weights in preparation for being thrown overboard. When U.S. Ambassador Philip Habib was informed of the abduction, he called then S. Koren President Park and warned him that he would face severe repercussions from the United States if Kim were killed.

Kim was flown back to his Seoul home, battered but alive, and spent the next nine years under house arrest, in jail or in exile. Kim boarded a plane to the United States in 1982. He used his time in exile well, brushing up on his English, working as a visiting fellow at Harvard University and cultivating influential American friends. He spoke out for democracy to Korean communities around the United States, and wrote a book about the Korean economy.



While in US, makes tearful plea for his countrymen and his cause.

Return to South Korea.

Even his US and international friends could not help him when he returned to his homeland in 1980. As soon as he stepped off

the plane, Kim was knocked down by Korean security officers and dragged back into house arrest. That year he again ran for the presidency and, again, he lost.

Personal Character

Kim Dae Jung's story has a lot in common with the experience of several other Peace Prize Laureates, especially Nelson Mandela and Andrei Sakharov. And with that of Mahatma Gandhi, who did not receive the prize but would have deserved it. Even under severe prison conditions, he managed to find things to live for. With indomitable optimism, he wrote about the pleasures he found in prison. Reading all kinds of eastern and western books: theology, politics, economics, history and literature. The brief meetings with his family. The letters from those closest to him, and the opportunities to write back, despite all the attempts to prevent him. And finally the flowers in the tiny patch of a garden where he was allowed to spend an hour a day.

From Kim's Nobel acceptance speech:



Allow me to say a few words on a personal note. Five times I faced near death at the hands of dictators, six years I spent in prison, and forty years I lived under house arrest or in exile and under constant surveillance. I could not have endured the hardship without the support of my people and the encouragement of fellow democrats around the world. The strength also came from deep personal beliefs.

I have lived, and continue to live, in the belief that God is always with me. I know this from experience. In August of 1973, while exiled in Japan, I was kidnapped from my hotel room in Tokyo and taken to a ship off the shore. They tied me up, blinded me, and stuffed my mouth. Just when they were about to throw me overboard, Jesus Christ appeared before me with such clarity. At that very moment, an airplane came down from the sky to rescue me from the moment of death. This was after the intervention of Philip Habib.

In 1992 Kim ran for the presidency for the third time, losing to Kim Young Sam, and announced he was retiring from politics. But three years later he was back



leading a newly created opposition party, and on his fourth try for the presidency in 1997, he won. His inauguration marked the first peaceful transfer of power between rival parties in 50 years.

Shortly after he took office in 1998, Kim held summit meetings with the leaders of Japan, China and Russia. He has subsequently met with leaders of the US, Italy, France and Germany, winning wide support for his "sunshine policy" with North Korea and putting South Korea in its strongest diplomatic position ever. He said that every time he heard of hungry people in economically depressed N. Korea, his heart was so very heavy, he had to take action. He has parlayed agreements with North Korea that have reunited families.

The Sunshine Policy

The Sunshine Policy based on one of Aesop's Fables in which the wind and the sun compete to see who can make a man take off his coat. The wind tries to blow the coat off, but the man just wraps it tighter. The Sun then takes his turn and makes the man warm and comfortable. The man then takes off the coat.



The idea of revenge must have occurred to the new president. Instead, as with Nelson Mandela, forgiveness and reconciliation became the main planks in Kim's political platform and guided the steps he took. Kim Dae Jung forgave most things - including the unforgivable.

The Sunshine Policy rejects policies of the past, blaming their failure on a cycle of distrust and accusation. In order to escape this cycle, South Korea, in effect, turns the other cheek when confronted with even the most outrageous acts by the north. In effect this policy is "Trust, don't verify." Unlike the "Trust but verify" policy of President Reagan, the Sunshine Policy avoids verification or demands for reciprocity, as they are believed to lead to cycles of distrust and accusation.



DEN NOBSKE
NOBELKOMITE
The Norwegian
Nobel Committee

The Nobel Peace Prize 2000

The Norwegian Nobel Committee decided to award the Nobel Peace Prize for 2000 to Kim Dae Jung for his work for democracy and human rights in South Korea and in East Asia in general, and for peace and reconciliation with North Korea in particular.

These words are from the speech delivering his Nobel award:

His has been the kind of personal and political courage which., regrettably, is all too often missing in other conflict-ridden regions. The same applies to peace work as to life in general when you set out to cross the highest mountains: the first steps are the hardest. But you can count on plenty of company along the glamorous finishing stretch. The work of the presidency has been in some ways more taxing than the years of exile and imprisonment. Not everything is moving fast enough to suit folks, and people say his accomplishment is small, just talk, really.

To outsiders, Kim's invincible spirit may appear almost superhuman. On this point, too, the Laureate takes a more sober view: "Many people tell me," he says, "that I am courageous, because I have been to prison six or seven times and overcome several close calls in my life. However, the truth is that I am as timid now as I was in my boyhood. Considering what I have experienced in my life, I should not be afraid of being imprisoned. But, whenever I was locked up, I was invariably fearful and anxious." Self-knowledge of this order does not detract from the courage!

In most of the world, the cold war ice age is over. The world may see the sunshine policy thawing the last remnants of the cold war on the Korean peninsula. It may take time. But the process has begun, and no one has contributed more than today's Laureate, Kim Dae Jung.

Gunnar Roaldkvam, a writer from Stavanger, puts this so simply and so aptly in his poem

"The last drop":

Once upon a time there were two drops of water; one was the first, the other the last.

The first drop was the bravest.

I could quite fancy being the last drop, the one that makes everything run over, so that we get our freedom back.

But who wants to be the first drop?

In the poet's words, "The first drop was the bravest."