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South Korea's Conversion Policy against Leftist Prisoners: *Regime Security and Politics of Thought Control in Cold War Korea*

Dong-Choon KIM

Abstract

This article analyzes South Korea's conversion policy toward leftist political prisoners under the Park Chung-hee regime, particularly following the implementation of the Yushin Constitution in 1972. The policy, which evolved into a coercive and violent apparatus, required prisoners to submit written statements renouncing their ideological beliefs. These individuals, often held in special facilities segregated from the general prison population, were subjected to systemic efforts aimed at enforcing ideological conformity. Despite the absence of any immediate political threat, the state's emphasis on forced conversion stemmed from its desire to assert ideological superiority over North Korea. South Korea's policy of ideological conversion can be traced back to Japan's Public Order Preservation Law of 1925 and the Tennō system. Unlike Japan's emphasis on reform and reintegration, South Korea employed coercion and demanded complete ideological surrender. However, this approach failed to dismantle the ideological convictions or moral stance of the political prisoners, and in many cases, served only to reinforce them.

Keywords: conversion policy, political prisoners, National Security Law (NSL), anticommunism, Yushin regime

Dong-Choon KIM is professor emeritus at SungKongHoe University. E-mail: 1989hkk@gmail.com.

Introduction

In 2001, the Kim Dae-jung government made the landmark decision to repatriate 63 long-term political prisoners to North Korea who had refused to renounce their pro-communist beliefs. These individuals, some of whom had been incarcerated for over four decades, were imprisoned solely for their ideological stances. By the end of 2000, 94 unconverted prisoners had collectively served 2,954 years—averaging 31 years per person. Their repatriation was carried out in accordance with the June 15th North-South Joint Declaration of 2001.[1]

Why, then, did the repatriation occur only after decades of imprisonment? Were these individual prisoners of war or political criminals? The sentences handed down to leftist prisoners were disproportionately severe compared to those for pro-democracy activists. Their prolonged incarceration stemmed exclusively from their refusal to renounce their beliefs. In South Korea where anticommunism was long the dominant ideology, leftist political expression was treated as a serious crime, often leading to indefinite imprisonment and, in some cases, continued surveillance even after release.

Although some unconverted prisoners were granted parole in the late 1980s, many remained incarcerated into the 2000s. International organizations such as Amnesty International condemned the policy and called for the unconditional release of prisoners held solely for their beliefs. Even after their release, many continued to face surveillance and discrimination under the Security Surveillance Act, which remained in effect until 2019.

The conversion system, implemented as early as 1949, served primarily as a punitive tool, incorporating long-term imprisonment, inhumane treatment, and forced ideological declarations. The practice extended even to the dying, with conversion statements extracted from prisoners on their deathbeds. The policy's aim was not rehabilitation, but retribution and

1. "Unconverted long-term prisoners," Wikipedia, accessed May 25, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unconverted_long-term_prisoners.

ideological control—both inside and outside the prison system.

This article examines the evolution and implementation of South Korea's conversion policy, focusing on its coercive dimensions during the Park Chung-hee era (1961–1979). Drawing on newly disclosed prison records, personal testimonies, and prior fieldwork conducted in the 1990s, the study positions the brutal conversion policy as part of a broader ideological strategy employed by the South Korean state.

Punishment and Control of Leftist Political Offenders in the Postcolonial Anticommunist State

Retribution, Reeducation, or Forced Conversion for Political Offenders

Throughout history, states—both modern and pre-modern—have imposed severe penalties on individuals who challenged the foundational order of society or threatened the interests of the ruling elite (Schafer 1974; Ingraham and Tokoro 1969). Political crimes such as treason, sedition, and terrorism are often deemed direct threats to state sovereignty and are therefore met with the harshest forms of punishment. However, the categorization of such crimes is deeply influenced by the ideological framework of each state (Cohen 1988).

Punishment traditionally serves dual purposes: retribution against offenders and the maintenance of social order. It also functions pedagogically, sending a message to the broader population about the consequences of dissent. Thus, incarceration, isolation, and punitive treatment are not solely retributive acts but are integral to mechanisms of social discipline, ideological education, and biopolitical control (Foucault 2008). In modern penal systems, the stated goal is rehabilitation and social reintegration. From a functionalist sociological perspective, punishment should facilitate correction and resocialization (Galtung 1958), whereas pre-modern systems were more retributive and deterrence-based (Foucault 1979).

In contemporary legal systems, criminal codes generally aim to

regulate overt acts rather than covert thoughts. Nevertheless, some states criminalize the expression of dissenting ideas, viewing them as threats to national security. These states implement punitive practices such as long-term incarceration, harsh treatment, and total isolation, especially in cases involving political prisoners whose crimes are rooted in ideological conviction.[2]

Imperial Japan's thought control system, codified in the Public Order Preservation Law (1925), emphasized not only large-scale repression but also ideological conversion (Michael 1976). Authorities targeted anarchists, communists, and Korean nationalists perceived as threats to the *kokutai* centered on the Tennō system. The justice system introduced mechanisms like "suspension of indictment" for those who demonstrated ideological reform. High-profile conversions, such as that of communist leader Sano Manabu, were exploited as ideological victories, reinforcing the legitimacy of the imperial regime (Fujita 2007).

On the eve of the second Sino-Japanese War, concerns about the ideological influence of released political prisoners led the Japanese government to revise the Public Order Preservation Law and enact the 1936 Thought Criminals' Protection and Supervision Law (Michael 1976; Ward 2019). These laws enabled preventive detention and continuous surveillance of ideological offenders.

The conversion policy in Imperial Japan was grounded in a feudal and totalitarian worldview, emphasizing ideological uniformity. In Chiang Kai-

2. Gustav Radbruch argued that conventional punitive measures are often ineffective against "convictional criminals"—those who act out of ideological conviction or communal motivation. According to Radbruch, such offenders are unlikely to be reformed through retributive punishment, as their actions are motivated by deeply held beliefs. This argument was based on the so-called "Radbruch formula," wherein a judge who encounters a conflict between a statute and what he perceives as just, has to decide against applying the statute if—and only if—the legal concept behind the statute in question seems either "unbearably unjust" or in "deliberate disregard" of human equality before the law ('Radbruch formula,' Wikipedia, accessed June 20, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Radbruch_formula). He proposed that political and ideological offenders receive special, even honorable, treatment because of their altruistic motivations. See also, Friedmann (1960).

shek's China, reeducation of anti-regime intellectuals was partly influenced by Confucian traditions of loyalty and social harmony (Jan 1983). In imperial Japan, rulers tolerated ideological dissent only if the individual demonstrated genuine repentance.

In this ideological framework, dissenting thoughts were considered societal contaminants that required purification through conversion. This principle underpinned the logic of wartime fascism, which sought to eradicate ideological deviance for the sake of national homogeneity (Mann 2004). During its colonial rule, Japan enforced these policies in Korea, using coercive reeducation to suppress anti-colonial sentiment and assimilate Koreans into its colonial empire.

The ideological control mechanisms in wartime Japan and China reflect a confluence of political expediency and historical-cultural influences. While ostensibly aimed at maintaining order, these policies rejected principles of freedom of conscience and rationalized coercive uses of state power. This historic backdrop provides critical insights into how postwar authoritarian states in East Asia suppress dissent and enforce ideological conformity.

Political and Legal Conditions for Implementing the Conversion Policy

Conversion Campaigns Before and After the Korean War

Following Japan's surrender in August 1945, Korea was divided into two occupation zones controlled by the United States and the Soviet Union, respectively. In the South, the United States Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) relied heavily on pro-Japanese, pro-American, and anticommunist elites, including Syngman Rhee and members of the Korean Democratic Party. These groups largely represented the interests of landowners, former colonial officials, and the business class.

Amid growing dissatisfaction with the US occupation—exacerbated by economic hardship and food rationing—opposition intensified across the South. Although the 1948 South Korean constitution adopted liberal

democratic principles, it claimed sovereignty over the entire Korean Peninsula, and anticommunism was imposed on political and social life as well as statecraft. The ideological onslaught of anticommunism marginalized not only communists but also liberal and social democratic forces in South Korea.

After the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, the Rhee government confronted armed uprisings and widespread dissent, including the Jeju April 3 Incident and the Yeosu-Suncheon Rebellion. In response, the state launched brutal crackdowns, imprisoning approximately 100,000 suspected leftists. These purges escalated into massacres during the Korean War and became part of a broader strategy of ideological control.

South Korea's anticommunist policies were enforced through legal instruments and repressive state institutions modeled after Japan's colonial administration. The National Guidance League (NGL), ostensibly a voluntary organization, was used to monitor former leftists. Meanwhile, the National Security Law (NSL)—enacted in 1948—criminalized a wide range of anti-state activities, including the expression of anti-Rhee statements.

Officials trained under Japanese rule revived pre-1945 conversion tactics, reintroducing policies aimed at inducing ideological repentance. Public declarations of conversion became political tools, symbolizing the ideological legitimacy, and superiority, of the South Korean regime. The state sought not only the symbolic renunciation of communism but also internal transformation through guided reeducation.

As during the Japanese colonial era, individuals were classified based on their degree of ideological reform (e.g., converted, semi-converted, unconverted). These classifications were institutionalized through the revision of the NSL in 1949, which permitted courts to mandate detention for reeducation rather than immediate release.

Suspected individuals, even after formally renouncing communism, were subject to surveillance and harassment. Some tens of thousands of civilians were executed during the early days of the Korean War, revealing the deep distrust the regime held toward former leftists. The outbreak of the war in 1950 provided justification for these extreme measures, as unconverted prisoners were viewed as existential threats. International

norms regarding the treatment of prisoners of war were ignored, political detainees were often denied basic rights, and political legitimacy became intertwined with the suppression of internal dissent.

Legal Instruments and the Yushin Regime (1972–1979)

The 1948 general elections in southern Korea (south of the 38th parallel) that created the Republic of Korea occurred under repressive conditions. Leftist parties and labor unions were banned, and political speech was severely restricted. The passage of the NSL in December 1948 marked a key moment, enabling the criminalization of not only overt political acts but also preemptive state action regarding thoughts and affiliations.

Dictatorship intensified under the Yushin system, established by Park Chung-hee in 1972. Amid Cold War détente and shifting global dynamics—such as Nixon's visit to China in 1972, laying the groundwork for normalization of relations between the US and the People's Republic of China—the Park regime perceived a threat to its ideological legitimacy. The implementation of the Yushin system was a domestic response to these geopolitical changes.

Under the guise of national emergency and ideological security, the regime suspended democratic procedures, concentrated power in the presidency, and implemented widespread political repression. The enactment of the Anticommunist Law (1961) further extended the reach of the National Security Law, allowing authorities to prosecute individuals for vaguely defined crimes such as "praising" or "encouraging" communism.

The Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) was instrumental in enforcing ideological conformity, wielding broad investigative powers over intellectuals, students, and opposition figures. Evidence for prosecutions included personal writings, artistic expressions, and public remarks. During this period, even liberal critiques of national division or US foreign policy were treated as subversive. By intensifying repression and enforcing conversion policies, the regime aimed to reaffirm its ideological superiority over North Korea.

This period witnessed the most extreme manifestations of the conversion

policy. The release of any unconverted prisoner was seen as a potential ideological loss to the North. Therefore, forced conversions were systematically pursued not for reasons of national security, but to maintain the South's ideological hegemony within the broader Cold War rivalry.

Conversion Policy Before and After the Yushin System

Implementation in the 1950s

The Korean War, which concluded in 1953 with no significant territorial or systemic change, became a major ideological battleground. One of the most visible and symbolic arenas of ideological competition was the UN prisoner-of-war camps, where US and South Korean authorities actively pressured North Korean POWs to adopt anticommunist stances and refuse repatriation (Hak-je Kim 2015). Psychological warfare became central to these efforts, with conversion framed as a moral and ideological victory (M. Kim 2019).

Taiwanese authorities also contributed to these campaigns by mobilizing intelligence officers and embassy personnel to reeducate Chinese POWs, turning them into "anticommunist heroes" who would then be repatriated to Taiwan (Burchett and Winnington 1953). These efforts established a precedent for future conversion strategies against ideological opponents.[3]

In the post-war period, these methods were transferred to the domestic prison system. Leftist partisans and individuals aligned with North Korea were arrested and tried by military courts, subsequently incarcerated under the National Defense Act (1948–1963) and the NSL. Many of these prisoners, including former anti-Japanese activists and North Korean elites,

3. While Taiwan explored educational reforms, notably mobilizing intelligence agents to convert Chinese POWs into "anticommunist justice heroes" for repatriation to Taiwan rather than mainland China, the South Korean and Taiwanese anticommunist POW strategy represented an early form of thought reform targeting communist soldiers (C. Park 2023).

remained ideologically committed and rejected the legitimacy of the South Korean state (G. Kim 2011).

The Rhee government introduced the practice of requiring autobiographical conversion statements, which functioned as ideological confessions. This policy was institutionalized following a 1955 escape attempt by leftist prisoners at Daejeon Prison. Authorities responded by demanding written conversion declarations from all leftist inmates and classifying prisoners into three categories—A, B, and C—based on their willingness to comply. The most uncooperative were placed in solitary confinement, while others were segregated or integrated with the general prison population depending on their perceived threat level.

Conversion surveys and ideological screening processes were implemented, reinforcing differential treatment based on ideological alignment. Prisoners were required to regularly submit letters of intent affirming their transformation, often under duress or coercive conditions (Jinsil hwahae wiwonhoe 2009).

Prisons such as Seodaemun and Daejeon became experimental sites for ideological control. Reports indicate that inmates organized clandestine political education and manufactured weapons, further alarming authorities and reinforcing the rationale for intensified conversion efforts (Lim 2019). Yet, the state remained ambivalent, oscillating between the use of incentives such as parole and the application of extreme punitive measures (P. Oh 1960a, 1960b).

Institutionalization under Park Chung-hee

Following the 1961 military coup, the Park Chung-hee regime further institutionalized the conversion system. Approximately 800 unconverted leftist prisoners were transferred to a newly constructed high-security facility in Daejeon. The KCIA assumed oversight of the conversion program, tying the possibility of parole or improved conditions to ideological surrender. Persuasion strategies included outreach to families and religious intermediaries, but coercive pressure remained the dominant mechanism (Seo 1993).

The KCIA established Counterintelligence Coordination Committees that integrated police, military, and intelligence agencies to monitor and classify inmates. Forms such as "Inmate Ideological Trend Cards" and "Inspection Reports" documented prisoners' ideological trajectories.[4] To gain approval for parole or sentence reductions, prisoners were required to renounce their former beliefs, endorse anticommunism, and pledge loyalty to the South Korean state.[5]

During the 1960s, the composition of political prisoners evolved. In addition to partisans and North Korean operatives, new groups emerged: progressive intellectuals, students, and overseas Koreans accused of espionage after visiting North Korea. These groups were classified into three categories: Public Security Prisoners (partisans and North Korean agents), Public Security-Related Prisoners (dissident intellectuals), and Current Affairs Prisoners (pro-democracy activists). The first two categories, resolute leftists, were always primary targets for conversion campaigns.[6]

Although precise data is unavailable, and not counting the massacre of hundreds of thousands of leftists, leftist sympathizers, and NGL members during the Korean War, it is estimated that around 250 leftist prisoners were executed from 1948 through the early 1990s. In 1954, 3,453 such prisoners were held; by 1960, this number had decreased to 2,156 (Beommubu 1987, 582). By 1970, more than 12,000 had reportedly declared ideological conversion and been released (Han 1975, 249).

Despite constitutional guarantees of human rights, conditions for unconverted prisoners remained inhumane. Solitary confinement, physical abuse, poor sanitation, and lack of ventilation were widespread. One former inmate recalled spending 33 years in confinement where he saw only one full moon, highlighting the extreme isolation (Y. Lee 1997; G. Kim 2011). For instance, a solitary confinement cell in the left-wing special wing of

4. These personal card and forms were originally prepared from the 1950s. See An Hak Seop's and Yang Won Jin's *sichalpyo* (Inspection Form) (Beommubu 1958, 1960, 1966b).
5. Yang Won Jin's Conversion Letter (Beommubu 1965); Kim Young Seung, interview by author, August 7 and 20, 2020; Yang Won Jin, interview by author, July 21 and 28, 2020; and An Hak Seop, interview by author, September 26, 2020.
6. This categorization is based on a prison officer. See Min (1989).

Daejeon Prison was so narrow that a tall person could barely lie down (Choi 2002, 56–59; G. Kim 2011, 280–281). Recalled one prisoner, "If you put 12 people in a 0.75 *pyeong* 坪 (2.47 m^2) room in the middle of summer, you can't sleep all night. Even sitting down you sweat, while the mosquitoes that came into the room were dripping with the heat of the sun and the heat of the people" (Y. Lee 1997, 60).

Prison cells lacked heating or air conditioning, resulting in extreme heat during summer and frostbite-inducing cold in winter. Illumination was provided by 30-watt incandescent lamps that remained on all day. Some prisoners were confined in cells with small windows that let in little light, resulting in extreme isolation. Conditions were especially dire in the 1950s due to the country's political and economic instability, and the treatment of political prisoners during this period was reminiscent of colonial-era practices under Japanese rule, underscoring the continuities between Japanese imperial governance and post-liberation authoritarianism in South Korea (D. Kim 2007, 220–223). Comparable conditions have been observed in other authoritarian regimes.[7] Ultimately, these conditions were less about rehabilitation and more about breaking ideological will, rendering genuine voluntary conversion highly unlikely.[8]

Forced Conversion and State-Sanctioned Violence During the Yushin Period

Under the Yushin regime (1972–1979), the conversion policy escalated into a program of systematic violence and ideological terror. Leftists were identified as existential threats, and their treatment within the penal system became increasingly brutal. Reports detail instances of torture, extrajudicial executions, and fabricated charges based on coerced confessions (Choi 2002; Guksa pyeonchan wiwonhoe 2007).

In 1972, following the Yushin declaration, President Park Chung-

7. In Taiwan, political prisoners were confined in overcrowded cells on Green Island (Nokdo 綠島), drawing parallels to Siberian political camps in Russia or exiles in pre-modern China and Joseon Korea (Hyun 2021).
8. An Hak Seop, interview by author, September 26, 2020.

hee explicitly ordered the expedited execution of political prisoners. The KCIA formed special task forces to intensify conversion efforts, employing gang members as surrogate enforcers within prisons. These enforcers were rewarded with parole opportunities in exchange for brutalizing unconverted inmates using makeshift weapons (Jinsil hwahae wiwonhoe 2009).

Between 1966 and 1989, 77 deaths were officially recorded as related to conversion efforts, including deaths from torture, suicide, hunger strikes, and forced feeding. In the most violent period (1973–1975), an estimated 60 percent of unconverted prisoners succumbed to pressure and declared ideological allegiance to the regime (Daetongnyeong sosok uimunsa jinsang gyumyeong wiwonhoe 2004).

The implementation of the Public Security Act in 1975 marked the institutionalization of preventive detention. Under this law, unconverted prisoners could be indefinitely confined in Protection Observation Centers even after completing their sentences. These extrajudicial measures directly echoed similar statutes under Japanese colonial rule.

Although the Security Surveillance Act was formally amended in 2019 to eliminate conversion pledges as a condition for release, its legacy remains a stark reminder of the extremes to which the South Korean state went to control dissent. Remarkably, nearly 200 individuals resisted conversion altogether, framing their defiance as a defense of conscience and dignity rather than a political stance alone (Jang 1993).

The Yushin period thus represents the apex of the conversion policy, where ideological conformity was enforced through a combination of state terror, psychological coercion, and legal subterfuge. The continued incarceration and abuse of unconverted prisoners became a symbol of the regime's broader project of authoritarian control.

Historical and Political Context of the Conversion Policy

The development and implementation of South Korea's conversion policy must be understood within the broader geopolitical and historical framework of the Cold War, US hegemony, and the lingering legacy of Japanese colonial

rule. As a frontline state in the global anticommunist bloc, South Korea adopted ideological and penal strategies shaped by external pressures and internal insecurities. The post-colonial political culture in South Korea was heavily influenced by anticommunism, which served not only as a national security imperative but also as a means of consolidating elite rule.

The anticommunist ideology that dominated South Korean politics emerged not merely as a reaction to the perceived threat from North Korea, but also as a continuation of authoritarian traditions embedded in Japanese imperialism. After liberation, Japanese-trained elites—including police, prosecutors, and military officers—continued to occupy key roles in state institutions. These officials imported methods of thought control and ideological purification directly from colonial-era practices.

Within this context, coercive conversion policies were employed as tools of ideological policing. While ostensibly aimed at reformation and integration, these policies in practice functioned as instruments of retribution and state control. Forced conversions, preventive detention, surveillance, and prolonged incarceration served to eliminate ideological dissent and enforce loyalty to the state. The application of these strategies varied depending on political crises and the perceived level of threat to regime legitimacy.

As previously noted, the use of state violence and thought control reflects patterns observed in other authoritarian regimes—whether fascist, military, or communist. Such regimes, when confronted with internal or external crises, often resort to measures such as censorship, indoctrination, and extrajudicial punishment. In the case of South Korea, the state's reliance on punitive ideological enforcement was intensified by its unresolved status as a divided nation technically still at war.

Conversion policies in South Korea bore strong resemblances to those in Imperial Japan, as well as to the reeducation programs in Maoist China. However, whereas China emphasized long-term ideological transformation through collective labor and indoctrination (Berkson 1977; Corrigan 1974; Smith 2013), South Korea's approach was more punitive and immediate, involving physical coercion and the suppression of civil liberties.

The origins of South Korea's conversion system—dating to 1949—

can be traced to Japanese-trained legal and policing institutions. These institutions remained embedded in the post-liberation state and formed the backbone of its coercive apparatus. The NSL, enacted in 1948, and its later supplements like the Anticommunist Law and the Public Security Act, created a comprehensive legal framework for suppressing political dissent and imposing ideological conformity.

The stringent conversion policy reflected the South Korean ruling elite's anxieties regarding perceived threats from North Korea. They believed that releasing unconverted leftist prisoners would destabilize the foundations of the South Korean system. That sense of *wartime* conditions by Park Chung-hee legitimized state violence against perceived enemies, whether real, imagined, or potential. President Park Chung-hee considered the continued adherence to communist ideology among released prisoners unacceptable. The early 1970s détente between the superpowers only heightened Park's sensitivity regarding the relationship with North Korea, particularly concerning the competition between the two systems for economic development and ideological supremacy.

In times of political crisis, public declarations of loyalty by former dissidents serve as powerful propaganda tools, reinforcing the ruling class's authority. Thus, penal policies for ideological offenders are not merely about punishment or rehabilitation; they are also instruments for consolidating state power and legitimacy.

The intensified conversion policy targeting unconverted leftist prisoners during the Yushin regime resembled retribution rather than pre-war Japanese-style rehabilitation. In theory, revenge, violence, and harassment contradict the principles of modern penal systems based on correction and rehabilitation, which prioritize social integration and crime prevention. But the extreme sense of crisis among rulers to threats to regime security or competition for survival with the enemy state can bring about the despotic or pre-modern style of correctional policy towards political prisoners.

State authorities may simultaneously implement correctional and punitive measures, depending on the political ideology, historical experiences, and strategic goals of the ruling elite. But the coexistence of retributive punishment and rehabilitative policies for political prisoners in South Korea

presents a complex dilemma. Imprisonment and punishment of ideological offenders serves as a deterrent, preventing the dissemination of subversive ideas (Han 1975, 15–16), But the punishment of leftists may actually make the rehabilitation policy ineffective.

The persistence of South Korea's conversion policies throughout the 1970s and 1980s, even after democratization efforts had begun, reveals the depth of the state's commitment to anticommunist ideology. Despite political liberalization in 1987, many unconverted prisoners remained under surveillance or subjected to renewed pressures to conform.

At its core, South Korea's conversion policy reflected the insecurities of a state that saw ideological dissent not as a violation of law but as a threat to national identity, and regime security. As inter-Korean competition for legitimacy intensified, the continued imprisonment of unconverted individuals served a symbolic function: reinforcing the narrative of South Korean moral and ideological superiority.

This form of state propaganda obscured the underlying coercion and dehumanization involved in the conversion process. The blurred line between rehabilitation and punishment became a hallmark of the South Korean approach. The coexistence of retributive and rehabilitative strategies created a complex penal system in which ideological loyalty was the anticommunist currency of *freedom*. Thus, the refusal to convert, even after years of imprisonment, became an act of resistance not merely to a political regime, but to a system of ideological domination rooted in colonial, military, and Cold War logics.[9]

By the 1970s, the conversion policy had evolved into a comprehensive system of ideological governance that extended beyond prison walls. Educational institutions, media, and civic organizations were mobilized to instill anticommunist values, reinforcing the state's ideological monopoly. This widespread indoctrination contributed to a climate of fear and conformity, stifling critical thought and political diversity.

Ultimately, the South Korean conversion policy must be seen as a

9. Kim Young Seung, interview by author, August 7 and 20, 2020; An Hak Seop, interview by author, September 26, 2020; see also, Lim (2019) and I. Lee (1992).

hybrid product of pre-modern feudal governance, colonial authoritarianism, and Cold War exigencies. It not only reveals the inner workings of an anticommunist state under siege but also raises broader questions about the ethical and political limits of ideological control in modern societies.

Conclusion

This study has examined South Korea's conversion policy against leftist political prisoners from its inception in 1949 through the end of the 20th century, focusing particularly on its evolution under the authoritarian Yushin regime. While officially justified as a mechanism for reeducation or rehabilitation, the policy functioned primarily as a coercive apparatus aimed at ideological suppression and political control.

Rather than fostering social reintegration, the policy relied on punitive measures: prolonged incarceration, inhumane prison conditions, psychological and physical coercion, and extrajudicial violence. The policy's retributive character was underscored by its most extreme implementations during the Yushin era, where the use of physical torture, surveillance, and forced conversion signaled the regime's insecurity and ferocity in its ideological rivalry with North Korea.

Although South Korea inherited the structure and logic of ideological control from Imperial Japan, the postwar conversion policy took on a harsher, more vengeful character. Whereas Japan's policies often emphasized public ideological repentance to reinforce social order, South Korea's approach emphasized punitive isolation, surveillance, and repression—particularly after the declaration of the Yushin Constitution in 1972.

Even after the country's transition to democracy in 1987, the effects of the conversion system lingered. Former prisoners who had refused to convert were subjected to long-term surveillance under the Security Observation Act, and it was not until 2019 that this system was legally dismantled. Thus, the remnants of Cold War authoritarianism endured long after the formal institutions of dictatorship had been dismantled.

The broader impact of the conversion policy extended beyond the prison

system. It contributed to South Korea's political culture marked by fear, ideological rigidity, and suppressed dissent. Citizens were compelled to self-censor in the face of possible persecution, and public discourse remained constrained. This climate inhibited the emergence of robust working-class movements and independent political alternatives, particularly in comparison with liberal democracies or socialist systems with more pluralistic traditions.

Ultimately, South Korea's conversion policy must be understood not only as a mechanism of punishment but also as an instrument of state ideology, embedded within the overlapping legacies of colonial authoritarianism, postwar anticommunism, and Cold War geopolitics. The policy's coercive nature reveals the contradictions within South Korea's modern state-building process: a formal democracy coexisting with deeply illiberal practices of thought control.

By tracing the origins, practices, and long-term consequences of the conversion system, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how authoritarian regimes use penal institutions and ideological campaigns to secure political legitimacy and control dissent. It also raises critical questions about the ethical boundaries of state power in democratic societies, especially when security concerns are invoked to justify the erosion of civil liberties and human dignity.

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