

# **A SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS OF 1988 SEOUL OLYMPIC GAMES**

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## **Abstract**

Seoul Olympics of 1988 has been regarded among the most successful events in modern Olympic history in terms of increased number of participants and political transformation in South Korea. This paper deals with both as an event and as a long-term effort contributed to political, economic and cultural change. Politically, it was central tool for successful diplomacy and an important factor in liberalization of the internal policies; economically coincided with the rise of the nation's electronics and telecommunication industry; and culturally, played a leading role in opening new perspectives on the outside world particularly for young generation of Koreans. The paramount goal at that time was to update and improve its national image; it was largely associated with political agenda expecting numerous socio-political consequences and could be used as a project to mobilize entire nation. The political leadership adopted the policy of confidence building measure well before the commencement of Seoul games, resulting in almost universal participation, and successfully conducted some events also in North Korea, and regarded as one of the great diplomatic achievements of this peninsula towards peace and fraternity.

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## **Introduction**

The study of the relationship between sports and politics has a long history, traceable in the western world to the ruminations of early philosophers about the ancient Olympics. Exploring all the dimensions of its relationship is a very large topic, the breadth of which is suggested by John Hobennan, that sport is a latently political issue in many of the societies world over, as deep-rooted traditions that exist in the society, which inhere in a sport culture are potentially ideological in a political sense. This latent political content becomes more evident when one considers some major polarities that bear on sport and the political world such as amateurism versus professionalism, individualism versus collectivism, male supremacy versus feminism, nationalism versus internationalism. All of these thematic conflicts belong to the world of sports, and all are of ideological significance in a larger sense.<sup>1</sup>

Considering the socio-political influence on sports, certain themes of great relevance can be summarized in relation to the three structural levels inherent in both the Olympic movement and the global system: national, international, and transnational. These levels correspond to three basic forces at work in the world and within the Olympic movement. This formulation draws most on Espy's,<sup>2</sup> works that provides an organizational framework for further discussion.

## **Sport and Nation**

The political nature of the modern Olympics intrinsically derives, partly, from their structure, which is built around the nation-state. The Olympic Games are structured in terms of nation-states as the participant athlete is a representative of a nation-state, and the national Olympic

committees are organized in the national boundaries. The international sports federations are composed of national federations that are organized within nation-state boundaries and the International Olympic Committee (IOC) is regarded as the umbrella organization for the other sport organizations within the context of the Olympic Games and other approved Olympic events; and IOC members themselves are considered as ambassadors of the nation they represent. Within this context the nation-state is the primary actor in the games, even though acting on behalf of the sport organizations.<sup>3</sup>

The consequence of this structure, the opponent of nationalism has partly plagued the modern Olympics since its inception in 1896. In addition to the formal structures, the design of Olympic ceremonies highlights nationalistic symbolism. In the opening ceremony, athletes enter nation by nation, the head of state of the Olympic host is accorded special honor, and the national anthem of the host country is played. In each medal ceremony, the winners' names and countries are announced, the national flags of the three medalists are raised, and the national anthem of the winner's country is played.

The ceremonial practices or formal structures prescribed by the International Olympic Committee are not the only factors responsible for problems caused by nationalism in the games, but the media and the participating nations themselves also play an important role in this context. Weeks and months before the Olympic Games begin; it is common for the narrative in mainstream news media around the world to stress the question of which country will "win" the Games or where particular nations will place. In nations both large and small, winning athletes are frequently treated as national heroes.<sup>4</sup>

The present limited research, to some extent, offers a valuable opportunity to explore the nature of Korean nationalism and how it may have been affected by the massive international interaction occasioned by the Seoul Olympics; as Korea possessed a distinctive and relatively homogenous language and culture, the history of which stretches back approximately 5,000 years.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with this heritage; the Korean people share a unique notion of nationhood, as embodied in the words *Uri Nara*, which literally means 'our nation'.<sup>5</sup>

The pursuit of national pride and national prestige through Olympic success has become a hallmark of the modern games as it has, largely become a domestic phenomenon, experienced within a nation by its citizens. This derives often takes the form of overall improvement in a nation's sports program, with the goal of better performance in international competitions. The number of Olympic medals won is frequently construed as an important indicator of the strength of a nation. During the cold war years, attainment of national prestige through sporting success was a common objective of the former Soviet Union and Eastern European countries.<sup>6</sup> In modern times, major actors on the international scene attach increased importance to sport and especially to the Olympic games, as participation grows and television provides maximum coverage to large numbers of spectators and the participant nations involved in competitions; as great importance is attributed to the Olympics by governments, athletes, and spectators alike, as prestige is inherent in the event.<sup>7</sup>

South Korea undertook a massive effort during the 1980s to improve its sports programs, leading to an impressive total of 12 Olympic gold medals in Seoul and placing Korea fourth among competing nations, behind the USSR, East Germany, and the United States. Korea's overall total of 33 Olympic

medals placed it sixth among all competitors.

The national pride, as experienced by citizens relates to one of the reasons why sport is the concern of the government, policymaking and social order that impinge on one another. It is largely believed, that sport creates politically useful social resources in the process of character building as an agent of socialization,<sup>8</sup> Although political scientists, so far, have not paid comparatively much attention to its important role in political socialization.<sup>9</sup>

The liberal pluralist theories of culture, the state, and civil society view sport as a set of voluntary social and cultural practices that provide effective releases from the tensions of everyday existence. Sport is consensual and is not seen as a formal part of the state system. The scholars of Physical Education believe that sport can be used to divert the energies of the masses away from problems of the political and social system of the developing or developed nations, and can be an effective tool for raising political consciousness.<sup>10</sup> From the moment Seoul was awarded the Olympics, the Korean government embarked on a systematic and well-funded program to broaden and strengthen the athletic prowess of the nation. The goal of this effort extended far beyond the training of athletes and teams for Olympic competition that led to a rapid expansion of the televised sports programs within Korea.

The national elites and political actors have long recognized the usefulness of association with winners, as projected and seen in the ritual ceremonies where Presidents and Prime Ministers or Head of the governments invite to congratulate the winning players and teams. In the same manner numerous national leaders have also used sport as an instrument of foreign policy and diplomacy, as in the case of the U.S. and Soviet-led boycotts of the 1980 and 1984

Olympics or the "pingpong diplomacy" pursued by China with the United States in the early 1970s. The succession of South Korean presidents, from President Park Chung Hee through Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo, sought to associate themselves with the idea of a successful Olympics as a national project. In so doing, they were simultaneously pursuing national reunification and waging a propaganda battle with the North, on the one hand, and seeking increased legitimacy for their own military based governments, on the other. The powers of their presidential incumbency offered many advantages, but also attempted to benefit from association with the Olympics. The opposition politicians and such other factions as the church, students and labor also sought to adopt appropriate Olympic meanings in the political struggle-taking place in Korea in the course of rapid economic and social changes taking place in organizing the Olympic Games.

### **Sport and the Moral Order**

The moral basis of sport pertains to each of the foregoing structural levels of the Olympics and the international system, as well as to the forces of nationalism, internationalism, and transnational that was at work within and among them. The questions of morality and sport are easily profound and pervasive as those of morality and politics. In Hobennan's analysis of sport, politics, and the moral order,<sup>11</sup> the core doctrine of the Olympic movement is unprincipled, to some extent, that strives for necessary global participation, even at the expense of elementary moral standards, and described the world of sports and politics coexist since centuries, and that each may on some occasions impinge upon the other in a destructive manner. The most notable example was the global silence that ignored the Tlatelolco massacre, in which hundreds of university students were killed just days before the 1968

Mexico City Olympics. As Hobennan put it, the world leaders whose national teams have confirmed their participation, were reluctant to condemn that bloody tragedy occurred before the commencement of the Olympic Games. Many of them observed it with political dimension and also tested it with Olympic spectacle; consequently, the 'world conscience' became quiescent."<sup>12</sup>

On September 17, 1988, more than one billion people worldwide watched the Olympic Opening Ceremony, telecast from Seoul. This was the largest television audience in history. Other aspects of this mega-event include the \$407 million sale of television rights to the Olympics, with NBC making up the largest single part of this record setting total. Global television and the politics of the Seoul Olympics provided an inside look at what went on during the 16 days of competition, and the several years leading up to this mega-event.

The scholars have paid much attention to Asia in recent decades involving efforts that brought remarkable economic dynamism. Another subject of growing interest was contemporary politics in the region; and during these years the relationship between politics and economics had evolved differently around the region. In some nations, such as Taiwan or South Korea, rapid economic growth was accompanied by political liberalization; in the Philippines, the move toward political openness preceded the economic take off, and Singapore, experienced economic dynamism while continuing authoritarian political leadership that rejects some fundamental beliefs of liberal democracy.

The Seoul Olympics-both as an event and as a long term national effort-contributed to political, economic, and cultural change in South Korea. Politically, it was a central tool of South Korea's successful northern policy and a factor

in liberalization at home. Economically, it coincided with the rise of the nation's electronics and telecommunications industry to the position of leading exporter of this region. Culturally, it was pivotal in opening up new perspectives on the outside world, particularly for younger generations of Koreans.

The impact of staging the 1988 Olympic Games at Seoul brought considerable change in the attitudes of the Korean people. As the cold war waned, a third transformation took place within South Korea during the 1980s. The nation moved from the heavy-handed military dictatorships of the cold war era toward a more liberal, democratic system of government. The Fifth Republic under President Chun Doo Hwan was the last of these dictatorships, and it became widely known among Koreans as the "Sports Republic" because of both the Olympics and the introduction of professional sports in Korea.

## **Conclusion**

The Seoul Olympics was a political project with numerous sociopolitical consequences. The top-down Korean leaders understood that the Olympics would have tremendous influence and impact on economic growth and publicity value in their international propaganda battle with North Korea; and will magnify the eventual scope in terms of socio-political development of the people.

The eyes of the world focused through television and other media on South Korea's capital-Seoul, hosting Twenty-fourth Olympiad; and got massive worldwide attention centered on the Korean peninsula and received a special position in the realm of politics, relating to the fabrics of nationalism, internationalism, and trans-nationalism. The 1988 Summer Olympics not only brought political stability in this



peninsula but also coincided with rapid economic growth and transformation into an industrialized nation.

The efforts by South Korea and representatives of the Olympic movement made it possible in co-hosting of several events of the 1988 Games in North Korea; it was an important part of Olympic history, as in the wake of the Seoul Olympics, Hungary, several other Eastern European nations and eventually Peoples Republic of China, former Soviet Union established official diplomatic relations with South Korea.

The Seoul Olympics were conducted with a prime objective of fostering Korean reunification; policy makers used the games as an effective tool for nation-building process, it was successful effort that brought tremendous economic growth, political stability and progressive social change among South-North Koreans. This was a remarkable achievement.

## References

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