Protest and resilience on World Peace Island
The nonviolent resistance of a South Korean village against the construction of a naval base

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Abstract: Since 2007, a small fishing village on the island of Jeju in South Korea has been fighting the decision to build a naval base next door to a UNESCO biosphere reserve. This article takes a closer look at the civil disobedience movement, based on the author’s primary observations and impressions. Furthermore, it analyzes the environmental, geostrategic, and economic arguments put forward by the government and the protesters’ subsequent response. In this fight between David and Goliath, the Gangjeong protest, more than having the actual power to stop the construction, is an example of citizens from all walks of life no longer quietly accepting disregard for democratic values.

Keywords: civil disobedience, South Korea

Introduction

Since 2007, a small village in South Korea has led a nonviolent resistance against the construction of a naval base next door to a UNESCO biosphere reserve. The naval base project in the village of Gangjeong, on the self-governing island of Jeju, was launched during the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003–2008) and has since been approved by two successive administrations. The official reasons for the construction of a military base on the island, about 80 kilometers from the mainland, are to allow for better policing of the sea-lanes and faster response to any acts of aggression by North Korea. The Seoul government emphasizes that the Jeju Civilian-Military Complex Port will lead to regional development and
provide maximum compensation for residents and investment into various facilities.

A majority of the 1,800 Gangjeong villagers, who mainly make a living from agriculture and fishery, do not accept these arguments as valid. They question why South Korea, which already has more than 100 military installations, needs another base exactly in their village. In a referendum held in 2007, 94% of the eligible voters opposed the naval base. They fear that its sheer size—once completed, the base will house 8,000 marines, up to 20 destroyers, several submarines, and two 150,000-ton luxury cruise liners—will likely lead to the erasure of their community, 450 years of local history, culture, and traditions. From the time the construction of the base was announced, activists, Catholic priests and nuns, Protestant pastors, law professors, teachers, artists, writers, families, and students from all around South Korea have joined the villagers’ protest. In order to hinder and delay construction, protesters file lawsuits and press for a reconsideration of the project nationwide; they also regularly block the entrance to the construction site with their mere bodies, chain themselves to anything available, and go on hunger strikes.

In November 2012, during a month-long stay in Gangjeong as a volunteer for Peaceworkers United States, I documented the persistent 24-hour/7-days-a-week resistance movement against the construction of the naval base. The first part of this article will take a closer look at this civil disobedience, based on my primary observations and impressions. The Jeju anti-naval base resistance will be examined in the wider context of dissent against military installations in South Korea, comparing it to the Camp Humphrey protest that occurred between 2001 and 2007. The second part of this article will look at the environmental, geostrategic, and economic arguments put forward by the government and the protesters’ response.

Part I

“I have no choice but to join the civil disobedience.”

“Take the bus 600 and get off in Gangjeong. If you don’t hear the announcement, just look out for the yellow anti-naval base flags adorning most houses and the extended peace murals on the walls.” These were the instructions I received to get to Gangjeong. As a first-time visitor to Korea it can sometimes be difficult to find one’s way. However, the yellow flags and peace murals could not to be missed. Arriving right on time for the daily 11 a.m. Catholic mass, I immediately witnessed the hourly police action to remove the protesters sitting in front of the gate to the construction
site. Over a period of four weeks, hour upon hour, the same nonviolent blockade of the entrance, and the disproportionate police reaction to it, could be observed. The most striking is the resilience of the protesters, young and old and from different social backgrounds, who despite their bruised bodies, the odds stacked against them, and the risk of high fines or imprisonment, keep returning to the front of the gate to fight for what they believe is right.

The entrance to the construction site, which totals 50 hectares in the village of Gangjeong, is located on a busy main road that links the capital of Jeju to the second biggest city, Seogwipo. On the side of the road, a colorful tent city has been erected with sleeping quarters, a computer tent, a small coffee cart, and a lot of banners and artwork. Every hour, about 300 police officers, stationed on a public parking lot 100 meters away, march to the entrance gate. A protester keeping watch gives a signal using a gong and all the protesters (between 20 and 40 on a typical day) take position in front of the gate and sit on chairs holding banners or sit on the ground with interlocked arms and feet. It usually takes the police about 20 minutes to clear the way and secure the entry and exit of the trucks. The protesters do not resist except for grabbing onto each other to make it more difficult to be removed. The eerie silence of the protestors is at times broken by the occasional scream of pain. During these 20 minutes, the busy traffic on the main road comes to a standstill. As soon as the last truck has entered or exited the construction site, the police disappear and the

Figure 1 • The protesters keep returning to the gate hour upon hour.
protesters go back to their activities: reading books, distributing flyers to passers-by, writing blogs, playing with the dogs, or having a nap.

Ironically, the police and the protesters share the same toilet facilities, and can sometimes be seen having friendly chats during the “breaks.” Most policemen and women are very young, some of them fulfilling their compulsory military service. Since 2011, 128,402 police have served in Gangjeong, with an average of 352 policemen and policewomen per day (Dong-Su, 2012). The police are rotated every two to three weeks, undoubtedly because the work is hard but also to avoid their gaining sympathy for the protesters. On multiple occasions the author observed policemen and women who looked extremely embarrassed dur-
ing the clearing of the gate and were quick to point out that they were only doing their job.

The protesters are very well organized and all tasks are shared. Cooking, press coordination, accompanying international supporters, translation, and the running of a peace center are assigned to different activists. Alongside the hourly obstruction of the construction gate, special actions are regularly organized. Activists chain themselves underneath cars, break into the construction site, or block construction trucks further away. Villagers and protesters, including the mayor of Gangjeong, have gone on long hunger strikes, filed numerous lawsuits against the construction of the base, and spent extended periods in the capital, Seoul, to gather support for the protest.

Since the early days of the protests, fewer and fewer Gangjeong villagers take part in the blocking of the gate on a daily basis. There are two reasons for this: first, most of them make their living fishing and farming and cannot afford to stay away from work for long periods of time. When special actions take place the village siren goes off and the villagers come to the gate as reinforcement. When 24-hour construction started in October 2012, a number of villagers began to join the blockade after work and stay until late at night. During the day, numerous villagers offer snacks or just come by and show their support.

Figure 4 • Special actions are organized regularly. Protesters chained themselves underneath the car and this protester on top of the car was covered in barbed wire.
At first glance, the support seems unanimous. However, the construction of the base has led to a deep division within the village. The decision to build the naval base has led to the breakdown of the community as conflict has arisen amongst family members, neighbors, and close friends over the political protest. One villager explained that some of his family members now even refuse to come together to offer memorial services for their ancestors, and even simple choices such as where to shop have become political.

The second reason for the decline in villagers’ daily participation in the blockade is that they are targeted for higher fines and experience more violence than the activists from the outside. Father Joseph Oh, a Catholic priest, explains that in the beginning when the villagers were fighting alone against the navy base, the police were much more violent and used to hit people. According to him, the police have used less violence since activists from the mainland have joined in: “They know that the news will spread far beyond Gangjeong if they use excessive force.” Since the start of the construction, around 700 arrests have been made with 500 indictments and 22 people imprisoned.

The total amount of fines for the anti-base protesters has accumulated to approximately U.S.$450,000 in addition to damage compensation fees of approximately U.S.$30,000. Since the election in December 2012 of South Korea’s new president, Park Geun-hye—the daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, who ruled South Korea for almost two decades—fines given out to the protesters have dramatically increased. From January to mid-February 2013 alone, around 100 people were on trial with combined total fines of U.S. $90,000. Supporters have been volunteering to raise money to cover the fines and the mother of an activist has opened a traveling “healing” snack stall, with all profits going to the fines.

Every day, residents from other towns and villages on the island of Jeju come to give their physical and emotional support or bring food and clothes. Sung Sim Jang (42), from a village 40 minutes from Gangjeong, has

Figure 5 • Fewer and fewer villagers are taking part in the protests on a daily basis.
taken a break from her work as a taxi driver to support the protest. She was on hunger strike for one month, even refusing to drink for over a week in November 2012. Jeju’s history is one of a constant struggle against external forces and the islanders are proud of their resistance to oppression and exploitation. When Jeju last hosted a military base in 1948, 30,000 people were killed, 40,000 houses burned down, and 90,000 people were made homeless (from a population of 300,000 at the time), as the government sought to quell an uprising led by a small group of alleged communist insurgents. Only in 2003 did President Roh Moo-Hyun officially apologize, calling the massacre, known as the “April third incident,” a “violation of human rights by the state.” He declared Jeju the “Island of World Peace” (Asia Times, 2011). Nevertheless, only four years later the same president finalized plans for the naval base on Jeju. A Gangjeong resident worried, “We feel that the April third tragedy is being played out again by the construction of the Navy base in our village.”

Shin Yong-In, a lawyer and law professor from Jeju Island, who regularly joins the blocking of the gate, explains:

I have no choice but to join the civil disobedience. We have exhausted all legal efforts to stop the domination of unjust power and there is nothing that I, as a lawyer and law professor, can do to stop the construction of the naval base. Villagers and peace activists are at the door of the building site day and night to delay the construction of the naval base, if only for five minutes. They face prison sentences, but continue nonetheless to follow the law of conscience. I decided to be part of this civil disobedience until the government and the military stop the construction.
The core group of protesters, who are there every day, are activists originating from outside Gangjeong, from other parts of South Korea. Many of the long-term activists planned to visit for just a few days and ended up staying. Every week, Catholic priests and nuns from different dioceses visit Gangjeong to hold masses and to join in the blockade of the entrance gate. A Catholic priest explained that he comes down to Jeju during his free days, as the struggle is one of social justice that concerns the whole nation. Protestant orders sent volunteers down regularly as well. Reverend Borah Lim of the Hyangrin Presbyterian Church comes twice a month from Seoul to support the peaceworkers. She has been arrested three times and has three trials running against her. She and four other pastors broke the fence to stop the construction. On another occasion, when security guards disturbed a prayer meeting she chained herself in protest to a construction truck.

Through contributions from churches, villagers, and supporters from all over South Korea, three meals a day are cooked and offered to the protesters. The mayor has transformed the upper floor in his office into a dormitory where activists can stay for free. Since 24-hour construction started, many activists sleep in tents on the side of the main road in front of the gate. Usually, a few international volunteers, mainly from Japan,
Taiwan, and the United States are present for a few weeks. Internationals risk being deported or denied re-entry into the country when identified as a Gangjeong anti-naval base supporter. South Korean protesters argue that the international presence is deterrent: one protester explained that with the international presence, the police might pinch the activists, but not blatantly hit them.

The fight against the naval base currently mobilizes more than 125 nongovernmental organizations across South Korea (ecologists, pacifists, Christians, Buddhists, and human rights associations) and more than 100 abroad (Save Jeju now, 2012). Although the Gangjeong anti-naval base movement has received attention by most established global media and support from global anti-base movements in Japan, Guam, Europe, and the U.S., the movement has received relatively little mainstream media attention in South Korea. “The protesters who have joined the fight from the mainland are frequently referred to as ‘outside forces’, communists, pro-North Korea agitators and ‘professional’ troublemakers in the mainstream media,” explained an activist. A 2011 editorial in the Korean Herald ends with the words: “We are just appalled at the extreme tactics of the dissidents who are chanting ‘peace’ but are actually inviting violence in pursuit of their dubious causes, using the island residents as hostage.” Many South Koreans have dismissed the anti base protest concerns as a classic
“not-in-my-backyard” (NIMBY) type of protest or a politically motivated agenda driven by leftist activists and opposition party members. Government compliant media reports regularly stigmatize civil protesters. The second part of this article will have a closer look of the issues at stake.

A forerunner to Jeju: The Pyeongtaek protests

The Jeju anti-naval base protest is not the first of this kind in South Korea. Prior to the democratic transition in 1987, social and environmental protests attracted little attention and government repression severely limited mobilization against military bases (Yeo, 2011a). The Republic of Korea Armed Forces is the sixth-largest army in the world (Wikipedia, n.d.) and South Korea spends 2.7% of its GDP on the military, ranking 12th worldwide on defense budgets (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute [SIPRI], 2012). Since the end of the Korean War, South Korea has had a joint military partnership with the United States through the U.S.–ROK (Republic of South Korea) Mutual Defense Treaty. Tim Beal (2012, p. 4), a
specialist on the two Koreas argues that “60 years after the independence of the Republic of Korea, it has not yet achieved full sovereignty. The U.S. military still has operational control of the army.” South Korea relies on its security partnership with the United States to protect itself from external threats, most notably North Korea. For this reason it is difficult to exclude the United States from any discussion about military issues in South Korea. Similarly, any protest against military bases will have an anti-American dimension to it.

Anti-American feelings among the population since the end of the Korean War (1950–1953) have generally focused on the behavior of U.S. military personnel, aggravated by high-profile incidents including rape and assault, such as the widely publicized brutal rape and murder case of Yoon Geumi in 1992. The Yangju incident, when a U.S. armored vehicle killed two 14-year-old schoolgirls in 2002 also ignited anti-American sentiments, especially after the soldiers were found not guilty by a court.

A forerunner to the Jeju protest is the Pyeongtaek protest that took place in northeastern Korea from 2001–2007. The U.S. military base Camp Humphreys was to be tripled in size to accommodate the majority of U.S. forces to be moved from Seoul to this camp. Between 2001 and 2004, the residents of Pyeongtaek, supported by Korean peace organizations, tried to fight the proposed expansion through legal means (Yeo, 2011b). Like in Gangjeong, the town of Daechuri was transformed into a “peace village” with the support of peace activists, church members, and local artists who painted murals and put installation pieces all over the village. Every night, similar to Jeju, residents and supporters gathered for a candlelight peace vigil in the village. When villagers refused to vacate the land, 12,000 riot police occupied Daechuri and destroyed thousands of acres of farmland and cemented over the irrigation supply. Major roads into the town were blocked, isolating the residents and some supporters inside. One hundred and twenty protesters, soldiers, and police were injured and 524 protesters taken into custody (Yeo, 2006). Immediately following the violence, the government went on a public relations campaign to severely damage the credibility of the anti-base activists. The movement never recovered and eventually faded away (Yeo, 2011a). In the end, the remaining farmers agreed to a resettlement. Once completed in 2016, Camp Humphreys will be the largest U.S. army garrison in Asia.

The Camp Humphreys protests were, in the end, unsuccessful, but what was originally a local movement turned into a national struggle. Many of the tactics used have been copied in Gangjeong and most of the groups that supported Pyeongtaek are now supporting Jeju, including Catholic priest Moon Jeong-hyun, a leading exponent of the anti-base movement in Pyeongtaek. He has now moved to Jeju.
Environmental concerns are one major reason for people rallying behind the Gangjeong anti-naval base protests. Many do not believe the Korean Navy’s assertion that the new naval base will be “eco-friendly” and have a minimal impact on the environment.

The island of Jeju is known for its unique nature and biodiversity, attracting more than eight million tourists in 2012 (“Jeju sees over 8 million tourists,” 2012). It is part of the New Seven Natural Wonders of the World and is the only place on Earth to receive all three UNESCO designations in natural sciences: UNESCO Biosphere Reserve (2002), UNESCO World Natural Heritage (2007), and UNESCO Geopark (2010) (Jeju Special Governing Province, 2012). The sea to the south of the island is home to rare soft corals and is one of the most important habitats for the endangered Indo-Pacific bottlenose dolphin. Along Gangjeong’s coastline, where fresh spring water meets the sea, lies a 1.2 kilometer-long lava rock known as Gureombi, which is part of a world heritage site. Its many unique freshwater tidal pools provide habitats for a wealth of animal and plant life and the freshwater springs underneath the rock provide 70% of the drinking water for the southern half of the island. Gangjeong is known as the “village of water,” and the Gangjeong stream is what makes the farmland some of the most fertile on the island. Greenhouse and kilometers of tangerine and apricot orchards confirm that farming here provides a productive way of life for its people.

A reason the coral ecosystem around Gangjeong is still undamaged is because, unlike in the Philippines or Indonesia, the locals never used dynamite for fishing. Instead, they have practiced the ancient art of the haenyo, where mostly older women dive without oxygen to depths up to 20 meters to look for oysters, sea urchins, and sea snails. Recognizing the natural value of the coast of Gangjeong, the Jeju government designated it an “absolute conservation area (ACA)” in 1991, prohibiting any further development. In 2004, the Ministry of Environment and Culture designated the area as protected, in 2006, Gangjeong was designated an “Ecological Excellent Village” and the area around Tiger Isle, an island one kilometer off the coast, became a “Marine Provincial Park”; two years later, Gangjeong was designated a “Natural Park” (Ahn, 2012). To carry out the construction of the naval base, however, the governor of the island unlawfully and unilaterally nullified the ACA designation in 2009. Sung-Hee Choi, an activist and artist from the mainland who moved to Jeju to be part of the anti-base movement, points out that “this unlawful nullification creates a dangerous precedent and puts other preserved
habitats in danger and even the whole system of natural environmental protection.”8

**Geostrategic interests**

A main reason for going ahead with building the base despite the strong opposition is to further geostrategic interests. The activists in Gangjeong, many of whom are members of disarmament and peace groups/networks, oppose a militarization of the “Peace Island.” “We do not understand why South Korea, with more than 100 military installations, still needs another military base,” says the mayor of Gangjeong. “We are not convinced by the argument that this naval base will enhance the security of our country.”9

The Republic of Korea Navy (ROKN) currently operates seven naval bases in South Korea (Jinhae, Busan, Donghae, Pyeongtaek, Mokpo, Incheon, and Pohang). For a long time following the war, South Korea relied on the U.S. Navy for the security of the outer seas while concentrating its naval capabilities on guarding its coast against North Korean penetration (Editorial, 2012). As South Korea has been undergoing rapid economic growth and expanding its trade, the ROKN has been steadily upgrading its naval forces. Since the 1990s, it has put its efforts into building a “blue-water navy,” a maritime force capable of operating across the deep waters of open oceans. The need to build a naval base on Jeju Island was already put forward 20
85 years ago, in 1993. The project launched under President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–2008) was the first major step into realizing this ocean-going navy in order to keep up with neighboring naval powers. The navy’s confidence to become a global player was greatly strengthened in 2011 when the ROKN successfully rescued the crew of a cargo ship from the hands of pirates in the Gulf of Aden. This enthralled the public at home and increased the confidence of the authorities to push ahead with the Jeju base project.

The Seoul government stresses that a naval base in Gangjeong is essential for the control of the military and civilian maritime traffic in the surrounding waters and to secure the maritime trade routes of the export-dependent country. The Jeju naval base is located in the heart of a triangle formed by South Korea, China, and Japan, which would allow the ROKN to operate with greater efficiency in case of an emergency. In fact, over 99% of South Korean sea trade passes through the channels near Jeju Island. Southwest of Jeju also lies the Ieodo reef, on which the South Koreans have built an underwater research station and to which China also asserts claims. Both countries believe that valuable raw materials are slumbering below the seabed.

Tensions regularly flare up between South and North Korea and the Gangjeong base is put forward by advocates as having an important role in coastal defense. They claim it must be completed and put into service as soon as possible in order to react quickly to any further military provocations by North Korea. The Jeju base would be the South Korean base furthest from North Korea; anti-base activists therefore doubt the importance of the base to primarily be used as a defense against North Korea. Military strategists counter this argument by agreeing that the Jeju base will not be able to defend Seoul from short-range ballistic missiles, but could protect other strategically important sites in southern Korea from longer-range ballistic missiles.

Activists nevertheless doubt the importance of this argument, as a number of other bases in the south could take over this role. They strongly suspect that the naval base will serve less as a shield against the main enemy, North Korea, than as an outpost for the U.S. Navy to keep the rising economic power of China under control. In fact, Gangjeong is located 500 kilometers off the coast of Shanghai, the economic center of China. Most activists in Gangjeong seem to agree that the naval base is being built because the South Korean government has received pressure from the United States, who wants to use the base as part of the U.S. missile defense system. When a journalist and activist called the Korean Embassy in Washington, DC to register her complaint about the Jeju naval base, the response was: “Don’t call us; call the U.S. State or Defense Departments; they are the ones who are pressuring us to build this base” (Ahn, 2011).
This theory has been strongly rejected by the Seoul government: “The Jeju base was built solely for the defense of the Republic of Korea and has no connections to American military installations. There are no plans to use the base for American missile defense, nor have Korea and the United States had any discussion regarding this issue” (Nam, 2011). Even if the ROK government insists that the project is not built to accommodate the needs of the United States, they have to admit that the U.S. Navy, due to the mutual defense pact, has the right to use all ports and airports in South Korea. Andrew Yeo (2013) argues in a recent article that it is reasonable to assume that the U.S. Navy will eventually gain access to the base: “After all, the emerging U.S. force posture in the region is aimed at securing access to allied bases rather than committing to any large-scale, permanent ones. And, given the importance of the U.S.–ROK alliance to South Korea, there is no reason to believe that Seoul would reject a request for port access.”

**The United States’ Pacific pivot**

The new American military doctrine of President Obama envisages strengthening U.S. power in the Asia–Pacific region. The U.S. has been consolidating its efforts to strengthen military ties with its allies in East Asia, with prime examples being the visiting forces agreement with the Philippines, increased U.S. naval access to Australian ports, the transformation of Guam into “a strategic hub,” as well as the Jeju naval base. The U.S. government has currently positioned around 50% of its battleships in the Asia–Pacific region and it plans to move 60% of its global fleet to the region by 2020. “The United States is a Pacific power and we are here to stay,” (“Obama tells Asia,” 2011), the U.S. president warned in November 2011, during a visit to Australia. There are currently 219 U.S. bases in the Asia–Pacific region. In comparison, China has none (Paik & Mander, 2012).

These developments are a signal to China that the United States will not allow China’s ascendance in this historically important area of economic and military domination by the United States. A report by the American Enterprise Institute (Mahnken, 2012, p. 7) states:

[S]everal challenges have begun to undermine US commitment to stability in Asia. The most consequential of these is the growth of China’s power and its military modernization, which threaten not only to deny the United States access to areas of vital national interest, but also to erode the alliances that have served as the foundation of regional stability for over half a century. The rise of Chinese military modernization means that in coming years, US forces are likely to face increased operational risk and that the strategic risk to US interests will be compounded.
The United States is still the first military power in Asia and trade flows continue to move in its direction. However, the dynamics of growth are changing and the odds are gradually moving towards China. While Beijing maintains close ties with Pyongyang, China has already become the largest trading partner of South Korea. Anti-base protesters are worried that the construction of the base will trigger a confrontation and an arms race between South Korea and China, with the almost inevitable involvement of the United States. “Not surprisingly, China sees the base as a threat against its national security. It is not difficult to imagine how Washington would react if China established a military base some 300 miles from the American coast,” remarked a protester. In fact, Paik and Mander (2012) point out that China has already, in response, accelerated its armament production and is increasingly courting its own regional allies of Malaysia, Indonesia, Brunei, Cambodia, and Russia.

**The “Samsung Republic”**

Geostrategic interests also imply international economic interests, but there are some stakeholders at the national level who also greatly benefit from the building of the naval base. In fact, the construction of the base has been subcontracted to Samsung and Daelim, two powerful South Korean multinational conglomerates. The Korean economy is dominated by several dozen large, family-controlled, corporate groups—the so-called *chaebol* families—of which Samsung is the largest. Samsung and Daelim have their own personal economic gains to make from the building of the base. Samsung is one of the top 100 arms producers worldwide, and a Samsung sister company is the largest defense company in South Korea (SIPRI, 2011). Public Eye, a platform for substantial criticism of “purely profit-oriented globalization,” accuses Samsung, who produces around one-fifth of South Korea’s total exports of “over 50 years

![Figure 11 • Protester holding an anti-Samsung banner.](image-url)
of environmental pollution, trade union repression, corruption and tax flight” (Publiceye, 2012), leading many to dub Korea the “Samsung Republic.” The big economic players have significant political influence on the national level to undermine and discredit the protesters.

The chaebol families, including the Samsung family, have played and are playing a significant role in South Korean politics. Ironically, Samsung sponsored the World Conservation Congress—a global gathering of environmentalists committed to protecting biodiversity—on Jeju Island in 2012, and the Gangjeong community was not allowed to attend the event to share their fears and concerns about the destruction of the fragile marine ecosystem.

**Conclusion**

The reasons for which activists from across South Korea and abroad oppose the base are manifold. They include calls for environmental protection, social justice, demilitarization, and nonviolence. Support for the anti-base movement at the national level is limited, in part because the mainstream media has not picked up the topic. When it has, it has portrayed the activists as troublemakers and has tried to discredit them. The protest demographics, however, invalidate accusations of professional troublemaking as the movement is composed of housewives, taxi drivers, teachers, farmers, and students, from all ages and social backgrounds.

During the long years of dictatorship, dissent and civil disobedience would have been met with bloody repression. Today, the government is not in a position to use such deadly violence on its people. For the most part, the government tends to ignore the Jeju activists and their demands. However, following the presidential election of Park

**Figure 12**  • A priest comforting a young protester following one of the hourly “clean-ups.”
Geun-hye in December 2012, fines against the protesters have been soaring. This seems to be the government’s newest tactic to discourage protesters from taking part in the protest. This is a much more discreet but just as effective method of repression. Nonetheless, the Gangjeong anti-base protests remain dynamic, strong, and well organized.

It is clear that in the eyes of the government, the local community’s livelihood and the natural and human resources on which it depends come second to geostrategic and corporate economic interests. Under cover of the North Korean military threat, the government seems prepared to use all levels of state power, from massive executive reinforcement to legal and political measures, to proceed with the project.

It is a fight between David and Goliath, in which corporate/government interests clearly take precedence over democratic agency. Indeed, despite 94% of the villagers opposing the base in a referendum, the government has not respected the wish of the people concerned and seems to be buckling under the pressure of corporate conglomerates and the weight of the United States’ wish for an increased presence in the Pacific. Therefore, for many protesters, the fight for their voices as citizens of a democratic society to be heard is slowly taking precedence over their original convictions of environmentalism and/or demilitarization.

The Gangjeong protest, more than having the actual power to stop the construction, is an example of citizens from all walks of life no longer accepting abuse of power quietly. For this society, which was ruled by dictatorships for most of its postwar history, the popular conscience is still deeply shaped by the repression that met protest and civil disobedience. Therefore, the Jeju anti-naval base protests in themselves and their persistence and endurance in the face of mainstream media demonization, rising fines, and government pressure, is a clear sign of a civil society awakening. This movement is already becoming an inspiration for other nonviolent protests in South Korea, the region, and even worldwide. Whatever the outcome of the protest, Mayor Kang says “we have been fighting for five years against the construction of the naval base in Gangjeong. If need be I will fight for another 50 years. This is the Island of World Peace! We are firmly convinced that peaceful protests can bring down dictatorships.”

CAROLE RECKINGER, a trained peacemaker, researcher, reporter, and photographer spent one month in Gangjeong, South Korea (November 2012) for Peace-workers U.S., to document the nonviolent resistance against the construction of the naval base. She graduated from the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, with an MSc in International Politics in 2007. She is currently studying for an LLM in International Human Rights Law at the University of London.
NOTES

1. Personal interview conducted 15 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
3. Personal interview conducted 24 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
4. Personal interview conducted 11 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
5. Personal interview conducted 15 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
6. Personal interview conducted 17 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
7. Personal interview conducted 19 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
8. Personal interview conducted 3 December 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
9. Personal interview conducted 19 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
10. Personal interview conducted 26 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.
11. Personal interview conducted 15 November 2012 in Gangjeong, South Korea.

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