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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHANG MYON REGIME OF THE SECOND REPUBLIC OF KOREA AND THE MILITARY

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Abstract

Prime Minister Chang Myon's government established Korea's first republic with a parliamentary cabinet system after 4·19 revolution in 1960. He took office as prime minister in August 1960 and was forced to resign in a military coup less than nine months later. This paper will examine the relationship with the military in order to seek factors why he failed to prevent the military coup.

Prime Minister Chang initially placed significant trust in the military to restore order and maintain security following the 4·19 Revolution. Despite recommendations from both former Prime Minister Huh Chung in the transitional government and the U.S. military in Korea, Chang repeatedly appointed civilian defense ministers with no military experience. This decision reflected an overreliance on the operational control that the U.S. Forces in Korea exercised over the Korean military. Furthermore, both the Prime Minister and his defense ministers opposed radical personnel changes, such as military purges, aligning with U.S. preferences.

Even though suspicions emerged already from late April 1961 that Army Chief of Staff Chang Do-young might be implicated in plans for a military coup, the defense minister dismissed the possibility, stating, "Who would foolishly commit such a suicidal act with 50,000 American troops present?" This underestimation of the military's discontent proved to be a grave oversight.

Chang Myon's administration struggled to produce meaningful results on key reform issues, including the punishment of those involved in election fraud and corruption, as well as economic reconstruction. Amid these delays, the government failed to institutionalize civilian control over the military effectively and could not establish firm authority over the armed forces.

Following the coup, Chang Myon faced criticism for fleeing during the crisis, which many viewed as a lack of leadership and crisis management. However, Chang's resignation was driven by President Yoon Po-sun's tacit support for the coup. Yoon argued that, under the parliamentary system, actual power rested with the Prime Minister, and he opposed mobilization of troops. In the emergency, Chang Myon recognized that President Yoon held military command authority under the constitution and chose to step down. This decision reflected constitutional ambiguity and the lack of a clear emergency response framework. Notably, Chang failed to contact key figures such as General Lee Han-lim, Commander of the 1st Army, which controlled most frontline forces. In contrast, the coup leaders had already embodied the political upheaval since the early days of Chang's inauguration.

Key Words: 4·19 Revolution, Chang Myon, Democratic Party, Civilian control over the military, coup, Carter B. Magruder

Introduction

The Rhee Syng-man regime, which had governed South Korea for 12 years since the establishment of the Republic of Korea, was replaced in 1960 not through an election but by a nationwide revolutionary movement led by students. During the Rhee era, Chang Myon held several key positions, including Chief Delegate to the 3rd United Nations General Assembly in 1948, South Korea's first Ambassador to the United States, and Prime Minister. When President Rhee sought to extend his tenure, Chang Myon spearheaded the founding of the Democratic Party in 1955, becoming a key leader. Without the support of the conservative faction, he defeated Lee Ki-boong in the vice-presidential election, May 1956.

After the March 15, 1960, fraudulent election, Chang led the anti-dictatorship movement culminating in the April 19 Revolution. Even before President Rhee resigned, Chang resigned as Vice President on April 23, 1960, expressing his disapproval of continued repression and power grabs, while hoping for the restoration of democracy.

Following the collapse of the Rhee regime, Chang became Prime Minister of the Second Republic of Korea.

However, Chang Myon was deposed in a military coup less than nine months after taking office as Prime Minister of the Cabinet in August 1960. Studies on the coup have highlighted the military's grievances, internal reform movements, and the vulnerabilities of Chang's leadership. Other research has focused on U.S. involvement, viewing Korea as a bulwark against communism. Furthermore, criticisms of the Second Republic often from narratives crafted by the 5.16 coup leaders and subsequent authoritarian regimes to justify their actions. Conversely, positive evaluations recognize the establishment of a pluralistic civil society and civilian-led economic initiatives during the Second Republic.⁽¹⁾

This paper examines the relationship between the Chang Myon administration and the military to identify the key factors that led to the military coup, which resulted in the collapse of his government.

Chang Myon's Regime and Military

Establishment of Chang Mon Regime and Formation of Cabinet

After the April 19 Revolution, the opposition party, the Democratic Party, created a new government with an overwhelming majority. The Korean people hoped for a government free of dictatorship and corruption. In the 7·29 National Assembly elections held after the April Revolution in 1960, the Democratic Party won overwhelmingly, securing 175 out of 233 seats.

The Democratic Party continued to engage in factionalism, disregarding the expectations of the citizens. The members of the National Assembly elected in July 1960 did not include reform-minded newcomers such as students and scholars who led the April 19 Revolution. With the loss of a proper channel for the nationalistic passion and desire for national development of young students to be expressed, they faced limitations in public support.⁽²⁾

Within the Democratic Party, the struggle for the position of Prime Minister, who was the de facto ruler, became the entirety of the power struggle, leading to confrontations

1. Hong Seuk-ryule, "The Military Reform Movement After the April Revolution and the 5.16 Coup," *Korean Historical Studies*, No. 158, 2012; Huh Dong-hyun, "A Study on the Historical Character of the Second Republic in Korea," *Journal of Korean National Movement Studies*, No. 41, 2004; Lee Wan-bom, "Chang Myon and the Regime Change: Focusing on U.S. Alternatives and the Process of Their Abandonment, 1952–1961," *Journal of Korean National Movement Studies*, No. 34, 2003; Kim Se-jung, "The Structure and Process of Civil-Military Relations During the Second Republic," *Journal of Korean National Movement Studies*, No. 34, 2003; Cheong Yun-jae, "Prime Minister Chang Myon's Political Leadership and the Collapse of the Second Republic," the Academy of Korean Studies ed., *Chang Myon, Yoon Po-sun, and Park Chung-hee*, 2001; Han Sung-joo, *The Second Republic and Korean Democracy*, (Seoul: Jongno Books, 1983), etc.

2. Chin Deok-kyu, "The Role of Leaders in National Development," in *Report of the Meeting for Guidance on National Development* (the Academy of Korean Studies, 1984), 247–248.

in the election of the President and Prime Minister. After the old faction's Yoon Po-son was elected President on August 12, 1960, on the 19th in the House of Representatives, President Yoon intended to nominate his supporter, Kim Do-yeon, for the Prime Minister position from the old faction. However, he failed to gain approval. Chang Myon criticized that the President, who should stand above factions, was using the Blue House as the old faction's headquarters.⁽³⁾

On August 17, the second round of voting resulted in Chang Myon being nominated. He secured 117 votes, just two more than the required threshold for confirmation, while 107 votes cast against him. With such a narrow two-vote margin, the Chang cabinet, upon assuming power, faced inevitable instability due to its weak political foundation. The faction that lost the prime ministerial race formed the New Democratic Party and once again engaged in fierce struggles for power.

Chang Myon expressed optimism, stating, "There is no doubt that modern representative politics, cabinet responsibility, and democratic governance, where sovereignty truly rests with the people, will be realized."⁽⁴⁾

However, difficulties arose from the outset in forming the inaugural cabinet. Prime Minister Chang strove repeatedly to establish a national government that would include members from both the old and new factions of the Democratic Party as well as individuals outside the party to prevent the party's fragmentation. Yet, the outcome on August 23, 1960, saw the appointment of 10 members from the new faction, 1 from the old faction, and 2 independents. Reflecting on this, Chang lamented that the Democratic Party failed to become a united entity, and he described his dismay at the lack of cooperative spirit from the old faction.⁽⁵⁾

The day after forming his cabinet, Prime Minister Chang announced his willingness to reshuffle the cabinet if necessary to promote party unity. Just a week after the formation of the first cabinet, the old faction of the Democratic Party established a parliamentary negotiation group under the name of the New Democratic Party. By September 10, 1960, in the interest of stabilizing the political situation, five ministerial posts, including the Minister of National Defense, were ceded to the old faction, forming a coalition government. However, dissatisfaction arose within the old faction for not allocating key ministries such as Commerce, Finance, and Agriculture.

During the Democratic Party's nominee conference on August 6, 1960, the attendance comprised 85 members from the new faction and 95 from the old faction. By September 23, the Democratic Party's new faction had grown to 95 seats in the House of Representatives,

3. Unseok Memorial ed., *Unless a Grain of Wheat Dies*, (Catholic Press, 1999), 69-70

4. Chang Myon, "My Four Years as Vice President," *Sasang-gye*, (June 1960), p.241.

5. "New Government Formed!" *Masan Daily*, Aug. 24, 1960; National Assembly Proceedings, 37th Session, Upper House, Record No. 11, Sept. 20, 1960, 8; Unseok Memorial ed., *Unless a Grain of Wheat Dies*, 71.

but failed to secure stability in the National Assembly, with 86 seats held by the old faction, 41 seats by the Civic and Political Club, and 9 independents.

Amid these changes, Prime Minister Chang Myon met confidently and energetically with U.S. Ambassador to South Korea, Walter McConaughy. The Prime Minister conveyed that a consensus had finally been reached, enabling his government to secure a majority in the National Assembly and laying the groundwork for the coexistence of two conservative parties. He expressed hope that this agreement would put an end to “years of struggle and division” as well as factional tricks. Chang confidently stated that, as a result of the party split, he expected to secure a parliamentary majority and hold about 130-140 seats in the National Assembly “before long.” He emphasized repeatedly that, although factional issues had hindered his administration since his inauguration, their resolution would now allow him and his government to focus more effectively on pressing national issues.⁽⁶⁾

However, the U.S. assessed the situation differently. While Chang had achieved a slim majority in the National Assembly, the highly fluid political environment, combined with the volume and gravity of the challenges at hand, led American officials to estimate that he probably has less than an even chance to retain a working majority in parliament over the next two years.⁽⁷⁾

In November 1960, with the founding of the New Democratic Party, parts of the Democratic Party splintered, leaving the majority of seats to Chang’s new faction. This led to discussions about the future of the ministers appointed by the old faction. Of the five old-faction ministers, only the Minister of Transportation remained with the Democratic Party, while the other four resigned. Consequently, on January 30, 1961, a single cabinet was formed.

On the eve of the first anniversary of the April 19 Revolution, the New Democratic Party demanded that Chang’s cabinet resign and form a grand coalition to manage the crisis. Chang had secured a parliamentary majority, albeit falling short of his anticipated 130 seats. The party held 124 seats, seven more than the majority threshold. Meanwhile, the New Democratic Party held only 65 seats. After an uneventful commemoration of the April Revolution, Chang was more confident and relaxed. The Democrats amended their party bylaws and elected as party president, a one-man leadership system.⁽⁸⁾

6. “Telegram from Embassy in Korea to the Department of State: the Meeting Between Prime Minister Chang Myon and Acting Ambassador Marshall Green,” Oct. 13, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 693-695.

7. “Prospects for the Republic of Korea,” Nov. 22, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 697-698.

8. “Public Authority Review Committee Completes Final Assessments,” *Chosun Daily*, April 25, 1961; Song Won-young, *The Second Republic: Song Won-young’s Political Experience*, (Seoul: Saemter Publishing, 1990), 248-249.

Military Political Neutrality and Civilian Control

Prime Minister Chang Myon, on November 14, 1960, addressed senior commanders of the Army, Navy, and Air Force. He recalled the impartial attitude and spirit displayed by the armed forces during the April 19 Revolution in maintaining public order, which earned public trust and support. Defense Minister Kwon Jung-don, speaking at the National Assembly on November 1, 1960, stated, "Our armed forces demonstrated their dignity as the people's army during the April Revolution and continued to maintain public order without the slightest wavering amidst the turbulent domestic politics, earning the trust and affection of the people."⁽⁹⁾ This perception indicates that Chang Myon administration held a positive view of the military and trusted it as the people's army, in contrast to its emphasis on thoroughly reforming the police, which had been politicized during the Rhee Syng-man administration.

In August 1960, Chang in his inaugural address, expressed his intent to implement the Democratic Party's gradual reduction policy. He announced plans to coordinate with the United Nations Command to reduce troop numbers starting the next fiscal year. He also emphasized efforts to establish military discipline, eradicate corruption within the ranks, ensure the political neutrality of the military, and prevent factionalism in the armed forces.⁽¹⁰⁾

Former Prime Minister Huh Chung of the interim government stated, "The greatest concern in those days was the military," stressing that the most critical task was to solidify the military's foundation of political neutrality. He repeatedly urged Chang to ensure harmony within the military in the new government. While acknowledging that under the parliamentary cabinet system, it was natural for a member of the National Assembly to serve as defense minister. He recommended general Lee Chong-chan, emphasizing a non-political figure trusted by the military.⁽¹¹⁾

On August 25, 1960, U.S. Ambassador to Korea Walter P. McCaughy, accompanied by General Carter B. Magruder, met with Prime Minister Chang. General Magruder emphasized the importance of separating the military from politics and excluding political considerations from personnel decisions.⁽¹²⁾ The U.S. State Department already evaluated General Lee as an ideal candidate for maintaining military stability during the critical period following the April Revolution, citing his reputation, integrity, and competence.⁽¹³⁾

9. "Emphasizing Military Harmony," *Chosun Daily*, Nov. 14, 1960; "National Defense Budget for Fiscal Year 4294," National Assembly Records, Nov. 1, 1960, 3.

10. Prime Minister Chang, "Policy Direction in Inaugural Address," *Chosun Daily*, August 27, 1960.

11. Huh Chung, *Testimony for Tomorrow*, (Saemter Publishing, 1979), 269; Kang Seong-jae, *True Soldier General Lee Chong-chan*, (Seoul: Dong-a Publishing, 1988), 169-173.

12. "Telegram from the Embassy in Korea to the Department of State," August 24, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 689-690.

13. "Telegram from the Department of State to the Embassy in Korea: Analysis of Post-Constitutional Amendment

The Chang Myon administration adhered to the principle of civilian supremacy over the military, considering that a military veteran as a minister would meddle in politics. He appointed Hyun Suk-ho, a politician from the “new faction,” as defense minister. While there had been instances of civilian defense ministers under the Rhee Syng-man administration, minister Hyun was not virtuous in the military. The two vice ministers of defense were also not military generals, alienating the military.⁽¹⁴⁾

Political reasons also played a role in ministerial changes. To form a coalition cabinet by including the old faction, the Defense Minister, along with three other ministers, resigned on September 7, 1960, just three weeks after their appointment. Consequently, Representative Kwon Joong-don from the old faction was appointed as the defense minister on September 12, 1960. However, in late January 1961, following the resignation of old factions such as Defense minister with other three ministers, the Chang Myon government aimed to establish a single cabinet. Following this, Hyun Suk-ho was reappointed as the defense minister.

Meanwhile, in late August 1960, Chang Myon’s cabinet appointed Choi Kyung-rok as the Army Chief of Staff. General Choi advocated the removal of corrupt individuals and supported reform-minded military officers. On August 31, during his inaugural address, Choi declared, “Those who have acted with flattery, corruption, injustice, and dishonesty in the past should be removed.” Expectations were high for him to focus on personnel reforms, including promoting junior officers and boosting morale among soldiers.⁽¹⁵⁾

Stabilizing the military was one of the most critical issues, yet after Hyun Suk-ho was reappointed, Prime Minister Chang replaced Choi Kyung-rok with Chang Do-young and demoted a former Chief of Staff to Second Army Commander in mid-February 1961. This occurred just four months after Choi’s appointment, despite the initial guarantee of a two-year term. Chang Do-young’s recommendation reportedly came from Hyun Suk-ho. Hyun emphasized to UN Commander Magruder that a capable and decisive Chief of Staff was needed and persuaded him to accept Chang’s appointment.⁽¹⁶⁾

Chang Do-young, who had served as the Second Army Commander during the fraudulent March 15 elections, was close to then-Vice President Lee Ki-boong. Although he had filed for retirement, he was appointed as the Chief of Staff due to his friendly relations with UN Commander Magruder and his pro-American stance.⁽¹⁷⁾

Former Defense Minister Kwon Joong-don had warned against replacing Choi Kyung-rok, arguing that it would undermine military stability. When Hyun Suk-ho

Situation,” June 11, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 665-667.

14. Lee Yong-won, *The Second Republic and Scenes*, (Beomwoosa, 1999), 235-236.

15. “Goals and Methods of Personnel Reform in the Army,” *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 6, 1960.

16. “Regret Over Incompetence of the Time,” *Dong-A Daily*, Feb. 27, 1982.

17. Hong Seuk-ryule, “The Military Reform Movement and the May 16 Coup After the April Revolution,” *Korean Historical Studies* 158, (2012): 219-220.

discussed the issue with Magruder, the latter initially protested, questioning the need for Choi's dismissal. Hyun argued that a decisive leader was required for the challenges and pledged to follow Magruder's recommendations. Magruder suggested Chang Do-young among other candidates, which Hyun accepted. Although there were rumors that General Lee Han-lim was the most likely candidate, Magruder's recommendation of Chang proved decisive.⁽¹⁸⁾

This frequent turnover of Chiefs of Staff raised concerns. Even President Yoon Po-son criticized the instability caused by replacing three Chiefs of Staff within eight months, emphasizing the importance of military neutrality and urging the enactment of a revised National Defense Organization Act. The dismissal of Choi Kyung-rok was debated in the National Assembly as well. The National Defense Committee warned against factionalism in military appointments and demanded that Hyun take full responsibility for any further incidents. The committee also conveyed its concerns to Prime Minister Chang.⁽¹⁹⁾

Reduction of Troops and Improvement of Military Welfare

At the time, the South Korean military comprised over 600,000 personnel across the Army, Navy, and Air Force, consuming 40% of the national budget. This excessive military size was supported by U.S. military aid. However, the Democratic Party advocated for troop reduction in July 1960 elections.⁽²⁰⁾

On July 12, 1960, Chang Myon, the Democratic Party's leader, announced plans to reduce the military from 700,000 to 400,000 personnel by fostering strong military. Prime Minister Chang Myon, emphasizing an economy-first approach, sought to redirect defense spending savings from troop reductions toward economic development.⁽²¹⁾

In his inaugural address, Chang reaffirmed the Democratic Party's policy of gradual troop reduction, noting plans to consult the United Nations Command and begin limited cuts in the upcoming fiscal year. Shortly after assuming office, during a high-level South Korea-U.S. meeting at the Central Government Complex on August 25, 1960, the government proposed reducing troop numbers by 100,000—50,000 in the first half

18. "General Lee Han-lim for Appointment? Rumors of Choi Kyung-rok's Dismissal," *Dong-A Daily*, Feb. 16, 1961; Kwon Joong-don, "Reflections on the 30th Anniversary of the Opening of Parliament," *National Assembly Review* 164, May/June 1978, 64.

19. "Warning Against Factionalism in Military Appointments," *Chosun Daily*, Feb. 24, 1961; Proceedings of the Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committee, 38th National Assembly, Feb. 28, 1961; "President Yoon Calls for Revision of National Defense Law," *Chosun Daily*, March 5, 1961.

20. Choi Kyung-sik, "Debate on Troop Reduction," *National Assembly Bulletin* 30, Oct. 1960, 10-11.

21. "Disunited Democratic Party Policies," *Chosun Daily*, July 19, 1960; Huh Dong-hyun, "A Study on the Historical Character of the Second Republic in Korea," 79-80.

of 1961 and another 50,000 in the second half—while also requesting an increase in economic aid.⁽²²⁾

However, concerns arose that reducing troop numbers solely to alleviate financial burdens could jeopardize national defense, with critics warning against prioritizing populist policies over security. U.S. Ambassador Walter McCaughy reported that South Korea's new government aimed to reduce troop strength by about 100,000. However, U.S. military commander General Magruder deemed such a reduction excessive, suggesting a more moderate cut of 50,000 troops.⁽²³⁾

On September 7, 1960, Prime Minister Chang stated in a press conference that troop reductions would proceed gradually, considering the Democratic Party's policy, the defense budget, and domestic stability. He emphasized again that the reductions would not affect combat capabilities and would focus on decreasing rear-area personnel while introducing new weapons. Plans for organizational restructuring, including abolitions and consolidations, were also in place at the National Assembly on September 20. Defense Minister Kwon Joong-don supported this approach, highlighting the role of technological advancements in enabling workforce adjustments and improving military welfare.⁽²⁴⁾

On October 11, 1960, a senior official at the Ministry of National Defense disclosed that for the 1961 defense budget, troop reductions of about 30,000 personnel had been set as a target, with each branch tasked with implementing personnel adjustments aimed at improving welfare.⁽²⁵⁾

In consultation with the U.S. military, the decision was reached to cut 30,000 troops within the year. Defense Minister Kwon later reported to the National Assembly that the military would maintain a strength of 600,000 personnel based on revised requirements.⁽²⁶⁾ In January 1961, newly appointed Defense Minister Hyun Suk-ho announced that no further reductions would be planned and pledged to focus on national reconstruction efforts.⁽²⁷⁾

Prime Minister Chang underscored the importance of improving military welfare and morale. His originally intended reduction of troops was reduced from 100,000 to 30,000, so improvements in the treatment of soldiers were limited due to budgetary difficulties. A budget allocation of 16 billion hwan for military welfare included 6.5

22. "Prime Minister Chang Myon's Inaugural Address," *Chosun Daily*, Aug. 27, 1960; *Dong-A Daily*, Aug. 26, 1960; Kang Sung-jae, *True Soldier General Lee Chong-chan*, 174-175.

23. "Memo of Conference with President Eisenhower," Sept. 14, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 692-693.

24. "Proceedings of the 37th Upper House," Sept. 20, 1960, 11, 17.

25. "Agreement on Troop Reduction Principles," *Chosun Daily*, Oct. 12, 1960.

26. "General Budget Proposal for 1961 Defense Expenditures," Lower House Office, "No. 5 of the 37th National Defense Commission", Nov. 1, 1960, 3.

27. "Cooperation in the National Construction," *Chosun Daily*, Feb. 1, 1961.

billion hwan for cash allowances for non-commissioned officers residing off-base, leaving only 9.5 billion hwan for salary increases. The 30,000-troop reduction saved merely 3.1 billion hwan, insufficient for significant improvements. Rising inflation and exchange rates further hindered tangible benefits. On March 17, 1961, Defense Minister Hyun pledged to raise non-commissioned officers' salaries in the 1962 budget to address persistent welfare challenges.⁽²⁸⁾

Chang's Reform Tasks and the Military

The Military Purification Movement and Chang's Government

After the April Revolution, a movement emerged within the military, primarily led by young officers, advocating for the depoliticization and reformation of the armed forces. Both the public and junior officers hoped for bold personnel actions to ensure political neutrality and eliminate corruption in the military under the new government

On August 27, 1960, during his inaugural address, Prime Minister Chang Myon stated, "We will focus on establishing discipline within the military, eradicating corruption, and securing political neutrality, while taking special care to prevent the formation of factions within the armed forces." In his policy speech to the National Assembly on September 30, Chang reiterated his commitment to ensuring political neutrality within the military to strengthen discipline. He emphasized improving the welfare of soldiers, carrying out military reforms, and boosting morale to restore order.⁽²⁹⁾

On September 22, in response to a question in the Upper House about whether Chang intended to take action against incompetent and corrupt senior military officials and propose a new military personnel act, Defense Minister Kwon Joong-don stated that military reform was ongoing and that a thorough restructuring would be implemented gradually.⁽³⁰⁾

During a meeting of the National Assembly's Defense Committee on October 19, Kwon promised to expedite military reforms without disrupting operations. He testified that, in collaboration with the U.S. military, a Military Review Committee would be formed separately from the Civil Service Reform Guidelines to focus on commanders directly involved in or actively interfering in the fraudulent elections and those who have accumulated unreasonable amounts of money unbecoming of their status.⁽³¹⁾

28. "General Budget Proposal for 1961 Defense Expenditures," Lower House Office, "No. 5 of the 37th National Defense Commission", Nov. 1, 1960, 3-4; "Discovery of 9 million Hwan Misappropriation," *Chosun Daily*, March 17, 1961.

29. "Prime Minister Chang's Inaugural Address: Policy Directions," *Chosun Daily*, Aug. 27, 1960; "Policy Directions with an Emphasis on Economic Priority," *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 30, 1960.

30. "Measures Against Corrupt Officers," *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 23, 1960.

31. Focused Military Reform: Addressing Rank Hierarchies and Tenured Personnel Issues," *Dong-a Daily*, Oct. 20, 10.

However, these efforts faced resistance. On September 21, Williston B. Palmer, Director of the U.S. Military Assistance Group to Korea, expressed concern at the airport before his departure, stating it was inappropriate to pressure experienced senior officers to resign in favor of younger officers. His remarks were criticized as interference by Choi Kyung-rok, the Army Chief of Staff, who issued a rebuttal. But the Commander of U.S. Forces Korea, Magruder, supported Palmer's stance, arguing that the dismissal of high-ranking officers during political upheaval could weaken combat readiness.⁽³²⁾

Amidst these tensions, 16 field-grade officers visited the Joint Chiefs of Staff on September 24, demanding explanations regarding the reform efforts and Palmer's statement. These officers believed that corrupt generals who had participated in fraudulent elections and accumulated wealth should be the primary targets of reform. They also felt their own promotions were unduly delayed due to systemic issues. Subsequently, Prime Minister Chang, the defense minister, Magruder, and the U.S. Charge affairs agreed to the retirement of five senior officers, including Choi Young-hee, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Lt. General Kim Jong-oh was appointed as his successor. However, the Army headquarters treated the actions of the 16 officers as insubordination, resulting in disciplinary measures.⁽³³⁾

On October 25, Prime Minister Chang announced that over ten senior officers, including the Chiefs of Staff of the three branches, had been transferred to reserve status due to their involvement in fraudulent elections and other misconduct. He also pledged to enact a special law to identify corrupt officers and complete the military reform by the end of the year. Regarding insubordination within the military, he emphasized that while the motivations may have been good, actions harming discipline would be dealt with in accordance with military law.⁽³⁴⁾

On November 14 meeting at the Ministry of Defense with high-ranking officers from all three branches, Chang declared the military purge concluded and urged the officers to focus on their missions without any apprehension. He also called for an end to any disturbances caused by insubordination.⁽³⁵⁾

Despite Chang's efforts, no substantial actions were taken to address corruption among senior officers. As table 1) the purge led to the resignation or forced retirement of over 20 generals, including Choi Young-hee, these measures were primarily symbolic. The National Assembly continued to raise the issue of corruption in the military. Kim Jong-pil, one of Coup's leaders later argued that the military reform movements indirectly

32. "Disagreement Between South Korea and the U.S. on Military Purges," *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 23, 1960; Hong Seuk-ryule, "Military Reform Movements and the May 16 Coup after the April Revolution," 202.

33. Kim Jong-pil, "The Path to the May 16 Revolution: Patriotism Amid Corruption After April 19," *Shinsajo* 1-4, May 1962, 45; Hong Seuk-ryule, "Military Reform Movements and the May 16 Coup after the April Revolution," 207.

34. "Senior Officers Transferred to Reserve Status Due to Fraudulent Elections," *Chosun Daily*, Oct. 25, 1960.

35. "Emphasis on Military Unity," *Chosun Daily*, Nov. 14, 1960; "Hope for an End to Insubordination," *Chosun Daily*, Nov. 16, 1960.

contributed to the May 16 coup by providing a cover for the preparation of the military coup.⁽³⁶⁾ Ultimately, inadequate reform efforts failed to address systemic corruption in the military, setting the stage for the May 16 coup.

Table 1: General-Level Discharge Statistics(04 19, 1960.12.31, 1961)⁽³⁷⁾

	Army	Air Force	Navy	Marine	total
General	1				1
LG	3		1	1	5
MG	4	1			5
BG	9	1			10
total	17	2	1	1	21

Socio-Economic Reforms and Military Perceptions

Emerging from the student-led April 19 Revolution, the Democratic Party’s administration was tasked with restoring democracy, which had been severely undermined by authoritarian rule, and focusing on economic reconstruction. On August 20, 1960, just before his official inauguration, Prime Minister Chang Myon expressed his intention to draft special laws for dealing with electoral fraud and illicit accumulation of wealth. He proposed consulting with the National Assembly, considering public opinion to ensure thorough justice, stating that the new government should surpass the transitional administration in addressing these issues.⁽³⁸⁾

Despite these intentions, Chang was cautious about drafting special laws to punish election fraud and corrupt practices, citing concerns over retroactive legislation.⁽³⁹⁾ Consequently, he retreated to the position that existing laws would suffice for punishment

The transitional government had already initiated action against those involved in electoral fraud. On June 14, 1960, the statute of limitations for prosecuting the March 15 election fraud expired. Prosecutors had begun investigations on April 29 and had indicted 62 individuals, including former cabinet members, Liberal Party officials,

36. Kim Jong-pil, “The Path to the May 16 Revolution” 43, 45.
37. “This is How the Military Revolution Was Planned and Carried out,” *Chosun Daily*, April 24, 1962, 2.
38. “Special Law for Culprits,” *Chosun Daily*, Aug. 20, 1960.
39. “Reluctance Toward Special Laws,” *Dong-a Daily*, Sept. 22, 1960.

governors, and police chiefs. Sixteen others were indicted without detention due to circumstances such as illness or bail.⁽⁴⁰⁾

On October 8, 1960, the Seoul District Court sentenced key figures such as Yu Chung-ryeol (former Seoul Police Chief) and Paek Nam-kyu (former Head of the Seoul Police Security Department) to death and life imprisonment, respectively, for their roles in the shootings and political gangsterism during the March 15 election. However, figures like Hong Chin-ki (former Interior Minister), Cho In-gu (former Chief of Police), and Kwak Young-ju (former Blue House Security Chief), who were accused of ordering shootings, were acquitted of murder charges, disappointing the public's hopes for justice.⁽⁴¹⁾

The Democratic Party government's reliance on existing laws for punishment led to significant public distrust. Following the court's lenient punishment, injured students from the April Revolution staged a demonstration on October 11, 1960, storming the National Assembly. This incident eventually prompted the government to legislate special laws.⁽⁴²⁾

On November 29, 1960, the constitution was amended to enable the punishment of those involved in electoral fraud and violence against protesters during the March 15 elections. This led to the enactment of the Electoral Fraud Punishment Act on December 31, 1960. Additionally, the Anti-Democracy Act restricted civil rights for those who had committed significant anti-democratic acts before April 26, 1960.

By the middle of April, 1961, the Special Court sentenced Choi In-kyu, former Interior Minister and ringleader of the March 15 electoral fraud, to death, while others such as Lee Kang-hak (former Chief of Police) and Lee Seong-woo (former Vice Minister of the Interior) received sentences of 15 and 10 years, respectively.⁽⁴³⁾ However, many other cases involving government officials, ruling party planners, and banking executives remained unresolved.

The Special Handling of Illicit Wealth Act, enacted on April 17, 1961, aimed to implement administrative and criminal measures against those who had accumulated wealth through abuse of power. This delays in punishing corrupt individuals from the Rhee Syng-man era continued to pose challenges for the government.⁽⁴⁴⁾

40. "Prosecutorial Investigation Concludes," *Chosun Daily*, June 15, 1960.

41. Jeon Sang-sook, "The April 19 Revolution and the Chang Myon Government," in Lee Jae-seok and Jeon Sang-sook, eds., *The April 19 Revolution and Democracy*, (Seonin Publishing, 2012), 96; Kim Dae-hong, "The April 19 Revolution and Anti-Corruption Measures," *Legal History Research* 62, Nov. 2020, 146.

42. "General Conclusions and Recommendations on Measures to Cope with Graft, Corruption and Nepotism in Korean Government," March 10, 1961, Record Group 84, Korea, Seoul Embassy, Classified General Records, 1960-62, National Institute of Korean History.

43. "Historical Justice Against Electoral Fraud Culprits," *Chosun Daily*, April 17, 1961.

44. "Korean Fortnightly Report," Feb. 21-March 6, 1961, FO 371/158543, Fortnightly Report on Political Situation, 1961, National Institute of Korean History, 47.

On the one hand, one of the most pressing and long-term issues facing South Korea at the time was economic poverty. The U.S. Embassy in South Korea assessed that due to the country's resource scarcity, military burdens, and division of North and South, South Korea would not achieve a self-sufficient economy soon. It concluded that if Korea wanted to survive as an independent state, it would require substantial foreign aid for an extended period.⁽⁴⁵⁾

The Chang Myon Government promoted an "economic-first" policy from its beginning. Stabilization of people's lives was an urgent task by improving the national economy and drastically reducing the number of unemployed people. In his policy address September 30, 1960, Chang emphasized that tackling unemployment was one of the most urgent tasks. He proposed using budgets for public works and various national development projects to provide temporary employment.⁽⁴⁶⁾

The lack of immediate results from the economic-first policy became one of the main reasons for distrust in the government. The U.S. Embassy noted that the atmosphere in South Korea was becoming increasingly precarious, with the economic and social conditions from April 1960 persisting and the government failing to act appropriately.⁽⁴⁷⁾

By 1961, when the administration gained full control over budget implementation, the government declared the year as "the starting year for economic construction." The Minister of Reconstruction announced three key economic policies in his New Year's speech: establishing a central economic planning body, implementing national construction projects, and launching a long-term economic development plan starting in 1961.⁽⁴⁸⁾

On February 26, 1961, the government appointed 2,096 university graduates as civil servants in technical and administrative roles for the National Construction Corps, with deployment ceremonies held on March 1. The National Construction Corps was placed under the Prime Minister's office, with Chang Myon personally overseeing its operations.⁽⁴⁹⁾

However, implementation in regional areas was still slow. Although the upcoming first anniversary of the April Revolution (1960) hinted at another potential revolution, there was no concrete organizational threat to the government outside of the military. Nonetheless, coup leaders capitalized on growing public frustration, encapsulated by slogans such as: "We can't live like this anymore! Let's try a change!" "Is this what we get

45. "Prospects for the Republic of Korea," Nov. 22, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 697.

46. "Economic-First Policy Outlined," *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 30, 1960.

47. "Report by Hugh D. Farley of International Cooperation Administration to President's Deputy Special Assistant for National Security Affairs (Rostow)," March 6, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. XXII, Northeast Asia, 424-425.

48. Kim Ki-seung, A Study of the Economic Development Plans of the Second Republic: A Comparison with the Military Government's Plans, 467.

49. "National Construction Corps Established," *Donga Daily*, Feb. 26, 1961; Song Won-young, *The Second Republic: Song Won-young's Political Experience*, 198.

after the change?" They criticized rising public anger over worsening economic conditions, with the exchange rate soaring from 650:1 to 1,000:1 and inflation skyrocketing. Public discontent with the lack of strong leadership and the inability of established politicians to address these issues was a significant factor leading to the May 16 coup.⁽⁵⁰⁾

The Chang administration's unification proposal, which called for a South-wide election under UN supervision. This approach officially rejected Rhee Syng-man's "march north" policy aimed at unification through force. Giving up military forces is a step forward, but North Korea has always opposed UN intervention. Reformist and students criticized this approach, advocating for: Autonomous unification excluding the involvement of the UN or major powers; Peaceful unification through negotiations between North and South Korea; Neutral unification aiming for international neutrality.

Prime Minister Chang also dismissed the Austrian-style neutrality proposal raised by U.S. Democratic Senator Mike Mansfield as dangerous in the Korean context. He stressed that students could not bypass the government to make decisions on critical national issues.⁽⁵¹⁾

As unification movements gained momentum in 1961, the Chang administration sought to legislate the Anti-Communism Act and Demonstration Regulation Act to curb mass gatherings and protests. This attempt sparked fierce resistance, leading to what became known as the "Opposition to the Two Major Evil Laws" movement. A large-scale torchlight protest occurred in Seoul on March 22, 1961, followed by a meeting at the Blue House on March 23, where Chang Myon, Speaker Kwak Sang-hoon, and senior lawmakers from both Parties discussed countermeasures. When President Yoon Po-sun asked Chang, "Can you maintain order in this chaotic political climate?" Chang retorted, "Are you suggesting I step down?" Their relationship grew sharply strained from this point onward.⁽⁵²⁾ For the coup leaders, the period from 1960 to 1961 was seen as a time when anti-communism had been overshadowed by an overwhelming desire for unification.⁽⁵³⁾

Countermeasures of Military Coup and the Regime's Fall

Response to the Military Coup

The origins of the May 16 military coup date back to February 1960, when some officers reportedly resolved to undertake a "revolution" amidst the fraudulent elections

50. Kim Jong-pil, "The May 16 Revolution and Nationalism," 44; Kim Jong-gap, "The Ideals of the May 16 Revolution and the Spirit of Anti-Communism and National Salvation," 12.

51. "Unification to Be Pursued Centered on the UN," *Donga Daily*, May 10, 1961.

52. Oh Je-yeon, "Controversy over President Yun Po-sun's Constitutional Authority and Political Involvement during the Second Republic of Korea", *The Study on the History of Korean Characters*, No. 23, 2015.3, 383-384; Unseok Memorial ed., *Unless a Grain of Wheat Dies*, pp. 84-86

53. Kim Jong-Pil, "The May 16 Revolution and Nationalism," 44.

of the Liberal Party regime. During this period, key military figures such as Park Chung-hee, then Commander of the Busan Base Logistics Command held multiple meetings and began plotting the coup. However, these plans were abandoned after the April 19 Revolution toppled the authoritarian regime.⁽⁵⁴⁾

When Chang Myon was elected Prime Minister in a liberalized political atmosphere, many colonels adopted a wait-and-see approach. However, officers frequently meeting as part of the military reform movement shifted toward a revolutionary course around September 10, 1960. Led by Park Chung-hee, a group of officers, including Colonel Oh Chi-seong, and Lt. Colonel Kil Chae-ho, discussed the declining national fate and military reform issues. They ultimately concluded that a revolution was inevitable. On that same day, after Kim Jong-pil's attempt to meet Defense Minister Hyun Suk-ho failed, the group decided on revolution during an evening meeting at Chungmu Hall.⁽⁵⁵⁾ This period was shortly after the Chang Myon administration officially launched its first cabinet. The prime minister asked whether corruption and incompetence had been evident in his first 18 days in power.⁽⁵⁶⁾

By late February 1961, the coup conspirators had made significant progress in organizing support in the Seoul metropolitan area. They also decided to stage the coup around the first anniversary of the April 19 Revolution.⁽⁵⁷⁾ However, these plans were shelved due to the Chang administration's heightened alert in response to rumors of widespread uprisings. Despite the increasing rumors, U.S. military officials underestimated the likelihood of a coup. In mid-November 1960, they viewed the military as a stabilizing force in domestic affairs, alongside the struggling police, and believed a coup was unlikely under current conditions. They anticipated such a scenario would only occur if the Republic of Korea faced severe deterioration.⁽⁵⁸⁾

By April 21, 1961, the U.S. CIA had identified coup plans in progress. When asked about the "April Crisis" rumors, Chang Myon dismissed them, suggesting they stemmed from North Korean or Jochongryon (pro-North Korean organization in Japan) schemes, and refrained from disclosing details due to the secrecy of ongoing investigations.⁽⁵⁹⁾ Even after receiving coup-related information, Chang did not take decisive action. On April 26, Chang acknowledged rumors about military dissent but did not perceive the situation as critical, expressing satisfaction with Army Chief of Staff Chang Do-young and even considering extending his term.⁽⁶⁰⁾

54. Kim Jong-pil, "The Path to the May 16 Revolution," 44.

55. Kim Jong-pil, "The Path to the May 16 Revolution," 45.

56. Unseok Memorial ed., *Unless a Grain of Wheat Dies*, 90

57. Kim Jong-pil, "The Path to the May 16 Revolution," 45-46.

58. "Prospects for the Republic of Korea," Nov. 22, 1960, *FRUS 1958-1960*, Vol. XVIII, Japan; Korea, 697-698.

59. "No basis for the rumor of an April crisis," *Dong-a Daily*, Feb. 24, 1961

60. "Memo from Director of Central Intelligence to President Kennedy," May 16, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*, Vol. XXII: Northeast Asia, 456-457.

On May 6, as coup rumors intensified, Chang instructed Chang Do-young to investigate thoroughly. General Chang responded, "I will look into it, but nothing significant will happen." That same day, Prosecutor General Lee Tae-hee was also ordered to investigate, leading to the May 13 arrest a man, who was suspected of funding the coup. Kim confessed to a coup led by Park Chung-hee, involving junior officers. However, when the military and prosecutors sought approval from Chang to arrest the main culprits, he hesitated, saying, "Let's wait and see."⁽⁶¹⁾ This decision reflected the limitations of civilian control over the military.

Defense Minister Hyun Suk-ho also recalled that 10 days earlier, Lt. colonel Kim Jae-hyun, head of the Defense Ministry's Investigation Unit, reported that Park Chung-hee was plotting a coup and that Chang Do-young was aware. When confronted, Chang dismissed it as baseless, labeling it a smear campaign. Hyun reluctantly instructed further investigation but did not act decisively, believing a coup was inconceivable under UN command.⁽⁶²⁾ The ROK military's operational command transferred to the UN commander was reaffirmed by the government on October 28, 1960.

Ultimately, general Chang Do-young facilitated and later joined the military coup, illustrating the civilian leadership's inability to control the military. During the Rhee Syng-man era, intelligence functions across the army, police, and prosecution lacked central coordination. It was only after the military coup that a centralized intelligence agency was established to integrate these functions.⁽⁶³⁾

Military Command and Chang Myon's Response

Within the cabinet system, executive authority resided primarily with the Prime Minister. President Yoon Po-sun admitted that his role in appointing the heads of the military branches and commanders was limited to issuing appointment certificates.⁽⁶⁴⁾

In late November 1960, debates in the National Assembly over military command authority became heated. The ruling party expressed concerns about presidential overreach, while the opposition doubted the stability of granting authority to the Prime Minister. The government and the ruling party argued that command authority belonged to the Prime Minister, while members of the opposition New Democratic Party aligned with President Yoon insisted that the authority should remain with the President.

Defense Minister Kwon Jung-don argued that the supreme authority on military should be vested in the prime minister, saying that if its power belongs to the president,

61. Kwon Young-ki, "Chang Do-young Knew of Coup Plot and Concealed it from Prime Minister Chang Myon," *Monthly Chosun*, 1996.12, 194; Song Won-young, *The Second Republic: Song Won-young's Political Experience*, 250-251.

62. Hyun Suk-ho, *A Life Confessed*, (Tamgudang, 1986), 92.

63. Jeong Ju-jin, "The Expansion of KCIC Functions and the Assassination of Its Commander," *Journal of National Intelligence Studies*, 2021, 31.

64. "Days of Solitary Choices: The Longest Day of My Life," *Dong-A Daily*, May 26, 1989.

not only would the National Assembly not be able to hold him accountable, but there would be a risk of presidential subversion. The opposition countered that granting command authority to the Prime Minister would result in excessive centralization of power, risk partisanship undermining military neutrality, and reduce stability due to the cabinet's inherently fluid nature. New Democratic Party lawmakers argued vehemently that stripping the President of this authority would leave him powerless, and they refused to concede command authority to the Prime Minister.⁽⁶⁵⁾

However, on February 9, 1961, newly appointed Defense Minister Hyon Sok-ho concluded at the Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee of the upper house that while military command authority constitutionally resided with the President, its exercise required approval from the cabinet meeting.⁽⁶⁶⁾ Accordingly, the amendments to the Armed Forces Organization Act were not finalized. General Chang Do-young reflected on the lack of clarity in the military chain of command, while General Lee Han-lim, Commander of the First Army, accepted orders to avoid bloodshed.⁽⁶⁷⁾

When the May 16 Coup unfolded, ambiguities in the chain of command became evident. U.S. Chargé affairs Marshall Green reminded President Yoon of his constitutional authority to mobilize troops. Yoon, however, declined, citing the parliamentary system, which vested practical authority in the Prime Minister.⁽⁶⁸⁾ It can be assumed that Chang had no choice but to step down because he perceived that Yoon was in control of the military in an emergency situation when the cabinet could not be held. It is unlikely that he has even contacted Lee Han-lim, 1st army commander who tasked with overseeing the northern front. Lee's efforts to contact the Prime Minister's Office proved futile, and no directive was received by the evening of May 16.⁽⁶⁹⁾ Moreover, the U.S. JCS warned general Magruder not to intervene in Korean affairs, saying, "No statement should be made other than Korea's defense mission against communist aggression."⁽⁷⁰⁾

CINCUNC Magruder supported suppressing the coup and visited Lee Han-lim to express his disapproval of Major General Park Chung-hee's actions in the afternoon of May 16. However, prior to this meeting, Lee had received directives from Yoon's office instructing him to avoid inter-military clashes. Lee doubted the government's capacity to restore democratic rule, even if the coup were suppressed.⁽⁷¹⁾

65. "Heated Debate Over Military Command Authority," *Chosun Daily*, Nov. 27, 1960.

66. "Questions on Defense Policy at the 38th National Assembly," *Chosun Daily*, Feb. 9, 1961.

67. Chang Do-young, *Chang Do-young Memoir: Nostalgia*, (Dream of the Forest, 2001), 271; Lee Han-lim, *Turbulent Times of the Century*, (Palbokwon, 1994), 359.

68. "Telegram from the Department of State to the Secretary of State Rusk at Geneva," May 16, 1961, *FRUS 1961-1963*. Vol. XXII: Northeast Asia, pp.452-454; "No Exercise Supreme Command to Prevent fights between Armed Forces," *Dong-A Daily* Aug. 5, 1963; "Days of Solitary Choices: The Longest Day of My Life," *Dong-A Daily*, May 26, 1989.

69. Lee Han-lim, *Turbulent Times of the Century*, 355-358.

70. Chung Yong-wook, "Resource Commentary," Contemporary History Institute ed., *May 16 and the establishment of the Park Chung-hee government*, (the Academy of Korean Studies, 1999), 27.

71. Lee Han-lim, *Turbulent Times of the Century*, 359-361.

Conclusion

The Second Republic in Korea was a political forum that provided hope for democracy. However, the National Assembly members elected in July 1960 did not include reform-minded newcomers such as students and intellectuals who had led the April 19 Revolution. Additionally, the Democratic Party ignored people's revolutionary expectations and continued to be plagued by factionalism, resulting in ongoing political instability. Chang's leadership was limited in taking bold actions to meet the expectations of the April 19 Revolution. Chang Jun-ha, who participated in the National Construction Project, described the government's approach to revolutionary tasks as "indecisive, incompetent, and unplanned."⁽⁷²⁾

Amid the opposition party's offensive, the administration secured a majority in the House of Representatives and were pushing for national development plans. With the first anniversary of the April Revolution, there was obviously enough discontent to worry about the "new April Revolution." There was no evidence of organized threats to the government except from the military.

As shown in the accompanying table 2), the pledges of the military coup were not fundamentally different from those of the Chang Myon administration. When asked about the fundamental objectives of the revolution on May 17, Army Chief of Staff Chang Do-young, a participant in the coup, explained that the focus was on "strengthening anti-communist postures and eliminating corruption irregularities."⁽⁷³⁾

Table 2: Comparison of the Chang Myon Regime's Key Policies and Military Coup Pledges

	Chang's Policies	Coup's Pledges
Ideological Orientation	Anti-communism	Anti-communism
External Relations	Pro-American & the United Nations	Adherence to UN Charter & Stronger Ties to U.S.A.
Social Reform	Punishment for Fraudulent Election & Wealth Accumulator	Eliminating Corruption & Old Bad Practices
Economic Policies	Economic First	Resolving the Hardships of People's Livelihoods & Building an Independent Economy
Unification Plot	North and South Korea General Elections under UN Supervision	Cultivation of Competence for Unification

72. Kim Gi-seung, "The Second Republic and Jang Jun-ha," *Journal of Korean National Movement Studies*, No. 34, (2003), 129-130.

73. "Chang Myon Takes the Witness Stand," *Chosun Daily*, Sept. 7, 1961, 3.

The Chang Myon administration faced delays in achieving reform goals, such as punishing those involved in election fraud and corruption and advancing economic development. It also failed to establish civilian control over the military or effectively assert authority over the armed forces. From the outset of his term, Prime Minister Chang Myon placed trust in the military to manage the aftermath of the April 19 Revolution and maintain public order. Against the recommendations of Acting Prime Minister Huh Chung of the interim government and the U.S. Forces in Korea, Chang appointed successive civilian defense ministers who lacked military experience. This decision was heavily influenced by overconfidence in the operational control exercised by the U.S. Forces over the Korean military.

Both Chang and his defense ministers also opposed drastic personnel reforms, such as military purges, aligning with the U.S. stance. Consequently, the military's own internal reform movements were quickly declared complete, and Chang replaced the proactive Army Chief of Staff Choi Kyung-rok with Chang Do-young, who had the endorsement of the U.S. Forces Commander in Korea. This move drew protests from President Yoon Po-sun and members of the National Assembly. Despite rumors from late April 1961 suggesting that Chang Do-young was already implicated in a military coup plot, the Minister of National Defense dismissed concerns, stating, "With 50,000 U.S. troops stationed here, who would be foolish enough to commit such a suicidal act?"⁽⁷⁴⁾

While Prime Minister Chang repeatedly emphasized the political neutrality of the military, including graduation ceremony at the Korea Military Academy in March 1961, he failed to implement institutional measures such as guaranteeing the tenure of key military appointments or codifying the principle of political neutrality into law.

On the afternoon of May 18, 1961, the Cabinet of the Second Republic held a meeting at the Central Government Building and resolved the collective resignation of the ministers. The Prime Minister did not stand with the people in opposing the military coup. Chang sought refuge in a monastery and attempted to contact the U.S. embassy but could not meet with the ambassador or the commander of U.S. forces. He had visited President Yoon several times while in office, but he did not even contact him at all to respond to the urgent political upheaval. His resignation was because he knew of President Yoon's support for the coup.⁽⁷⁵⁾

The military junta that instigated the upheaval emphasized their loyalty to the country and pledged to return to the army once they had completed their revolutionary duties but then entered politics themselves. President Yoon Po-sun supported the coup, expecting the military to transfer power to capable social leaders and politicians. When this did not occur, Yoon resigned from his post in the military government on March 12, 1962.⁽⁷⁶⁾

74. Hyun Suk-ho, *A Life Confessed*, 92.

75. Lee Wan-bom, "Chang Myon and Regime Change: The U.S. Perspective and Its Abandonment, 1952-1961," 57.

76. Kim Myung-goo, *Yoon Po-sun: A Man of Principle*, (Korea University Press, 2011), 255-256.

In the presidential election held on October 15, 1963, over a year after the coup, Park Chung-hee, a leading figure, narrowly defeated Yoon Po-sun by 156,026 votes. This can be interpreted as a critical endorsement of the military coup by the Korean public. Subsequently, Park justified the coup's legitimacy by focusing on economic issues.⁽⁷⁷⁾

The May 16 Coup in 1961 set a harmful precedent in South Korea's history by justifying a military takeover during a nine-month period of instability. Despite U.S. operational command over South Korean forces at the time, the coup ignored this and eventually gained U.S. approval post facto. Following Park Chung-hee's assassination in October 1979, the new military regime staged another coup in December 1979. Similarly, in December 2024, after President Yoon Suk-yeol, a former Prosecutor General, lost the majority to the opposition parties, he responded to his weakened position by labeling them as pro-North Korea, anti-state forces, and staged a military coup instead of overcoming the situation through political means.

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77. Chun In-kwon, *A Biography of Park Chung-hee*, (Ilhaksa, 2007), 167.