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Politics in the Republic of Korea: Rethinking Democratization Debate

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Abstract

This article surveys the trajectory of democratization in the Republic of Korea following current developments in four categories: 1) consolidating representative democracy; 2) problems with the separation of powers; 3) evolving civil society with pro-and anti-democratic elements in what has been termed democratic decay; and 4) the rise of populist politics. Results are that the history of democratic transition in the Republic of Korea is dominated by mainstream commentaries such as the student and labor movements, influencing the description of transition to democracy until the political crisis from the 21st century onward led to reconsideration of national political problems. This article presents a new concept of democratic transition in the Republic of Korea based on the academic work of a feminist group which complements traditional concepts.

Keywords: Democratization, The Republic of Korea, Representative democracy, Separation of powers

Introduction

From the post-Cold War era in the 1950s to the present, the United States has played a significant role in shaping the political institutions and international stance of the Republic of Korea, commonly referred to as 'South Korea'. Political scientist, Hans Morgenthau stated "For two millennia, the "Korean Peninsula"[1] has been characterized by a delicate balance of power among various strong entities, each vying for control of the region." To understand contemporary South Korean politics, it is imperative to concurrently examine the interconnectedness of superpowers and the internal political dynamics of South Korea.

This article briefly explores the political background of the Republic of Korea. Then some contemporary political issues in South Korean politics are pointed out. The presentation is divided into four issues: 1) characteristics of South Korea in the modern political era, starting with the explanation from the post-Korean War period onwards, which is called the "development-oriented state", 2) the transition to democracy which is a distinctive feature of South Korean politics and government, 3) the main debate on South Korean political problems and 4) a summary of South Korean politics aiming to compile academic debates to point out important issues affecting the understanding of South Korean politics in the 21st century.

This article provides a brief exploration of the political background of the Republic of Korea, followed by an examination of contemporary political issues in South Korean politics. The presentation is divided into four sections: 1) characteristics of South Korea in the modern political era, commencing with an overview from the post-Korean War period onwards, often referred to as the 'developmental state' 2) the transition to democracy, which stands as a distinctive feature of South Korean politics and government. 3) the primary debates surrounding political issues in South Korea. 4) a summary of South Korean politics, aiming to compile academic debates and highlight significant issues shaping the understanding of South Korean politics in the 21st century.

1. Developmental State

To comprehend South Korean politics in the modern era, a brief examination of its historical trajectory can provide valuable insights into current political challenges. Chaiwat Khamchoo and Nithi Nueangjamnong delineate key periods of political development in South Korea, which are divided into five periods as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Important Periods of Political Development in South Korea [2]

Period	Forms of Government	International Context	Development Paths
1392-1910	- During the Joseon Dynasty, Korea was governed according to the principles of Confucianism. "Throughout much of this era, the court was predominantly influenced by the noble class, known as the Yangban.	- The system of international relations in East Asia often revolved around China as a central power - Western imperialism experienced significant expansion and exerted growing dominance over the Asian continent.	- The economy relied primarily on basic agriculture and handicrafts. - Commercial activities were relatively restricted, with limited scope and scale.
1910-1945	- Korea was under Japanese colonial rule.	- World War 2 - Fascism and Communism expansion	- Development of basic industries by Japan
1945-1953	- The Korean War resulted in the division of Korea into two parts. - South Korea, supported by the United States, played a significant role in drafting its constitution. - Civilian dictatorship government	- Cold War - Korean War	- Reliance on foreign assistance (United States of America) - The economy collapses from the Korean War
1953-1987	- A totalitarian government, comprising of both civilian and military elements, suppressed opponents and pro-democracy movements.	- Cold War - Tensions on the Korean Peninsula	- Beginning of the industrial development with the state driving development.
1987-Present	- Presidential democracy - The government grapples with the challenge of a minority in the House of Representatives.	- Post- Cold War - Globalization and the increasingly prominent role of Asia	- Neoliberal influence - The government adopts a new approach to promoting development.

Table 1 highlights the deep historical roots of South Korean politics, dating back to the 14th century. Particularly since the 20th century, South Korea has been intricately entwined with international politics, profoundly shaping its domestic landscape and political issues in the modern era. Extensive scholarly research suggests that South Korea embarked on its journey towards modern statehood by adopting the developmental state model, with the United States playing a pivotal role as both a political architect and a guide for national development. Such explanations have been predominant in understanding South Korean

politics since the post-Cold War period.

For instance, Young-lob Chung's [3] research elucidates that following Japan's colonization of South Korea for 35 years until 1945, the Korean Peninsula witnessed a remarkable transformation, with the country's output increasing 38-fold and income per capita skyrocketing from 778 US dollars to 12,422 US dollars by 2000. When considered alongside the insights provided in Table 1, it becomes evident that the shift from an agrarian to an industrial society in the 1950s laid a crucial foundation for South Korea's subsequent development.

South Korea has emerged as one of the world's top 10 industrial superpowers, a feat largely attributed to state-led development initiatives since 1953, following the Korean War. Extensive data supports this assertion, indicating a significant increase in the country's gross domestic product, with the industrial sector accounting for 33 percent, while the agricultural sector dwindled to 10 percent [4]. Young-lob Chung's research sheds light on the formation of the South Korean state and the evolution of production methods, which have been instrumental in shaping its developmental trajectory over an extended period. Furthermore, Chung's work underscores the distinctive characteristics of Korea's development path,

Iain Pirie's[5] writing offers support for the characterization of South Korea as a developmental state during the Cold War era. However, Pirie suggests that this defining feature became more pronounced following the 1997 economic crisis. This perspective challenges the prevailing understanding, which emphasizes the role of the global political economy in shaping South Korea's political and economic landscape. Pirie contends that South Korea began embracing neoliberal policies in response to the evolving global economic dynamics, particularly influenced by the US and UK.

The foundation of South Korea's industrialization, led by Chaebol conglomerates under authoritarian governance, underwent adaptation, leading to a radical restructuring program following the 1997 crisis. Pirie argues that South Korea represents a unique model distinct from more established counterparts like Japan or China. Consequently, a comprehensive understanding of South Korea's political development necessitates an examination of changes across dimensions of political economy, illuminating the interplay between state evolution, state formation, and the transition to democracy. This approach offers valuable insights into the complexities of South Korean politics and governance.

2. the Democratization in South Korea

Scholarly works by Michael J. Seth[6], Lee Nnamhee[7], Sungsoo Kim[8], and Hagen Koo[9] provide compelling evidence supporting the claim that changes in South Korean political economy throughout the Cold War era were instrumental in the emergence of a middle class. These writings argue that economic transformations during the 1960s were pivotal in shaping two key societal groups: the middle class and industrial workers, both of which became catalysts for democratic movements. While Koo's focus is on labor dynamics and Seth's on business, Lee and Kim's research highlights the role of civil society movements, particularly those led by students. Despite their differing emphases, these scholars share a common theme: the centrality of economic changes as precursors to democratic reform. Consequently, their works are essential for comprehending contemporary South Korean politics.

In analyzing the transition to democracy in South Korea, scholarly works often emphasize three primary factors. Firstly, structural factors are underscored, positing that South Korean society's shift from agrarian to industrial systems in the 1950s-1980s catalyzed significant economic development. Secondly, external influences, particularly the geopolitical rivalry between superpowers during the Cold War, resulted in South Korea's status as a 'client state,' with the United States exerting considerable influence. This influence is exemplified

by the adoption of the United States' constitutional model.

Lastly, the role of civil society actors and elites[10] is highlighted, with their actions shaping key events and the trajectory of democratic transition. This narrative frequently centers on the presidency of Park Chung Hee, whose initial narrow election victory in 1967 was followed by a constitutional amendment enabling extended presidential terms. While South Korea experienced remarkable economic growth under Park's leadership, his declaration of martial law in 1972, dissolution of parliament, and promulgation of the Yushin Constitution, granting the president absolute control, elicited widespread dissatisfaction and ultimately sparked public unrest. Park's response to the uprising was characterized by suppression and the imprisonment of hundreds of protestors.

In 1979, Park Chung Hee's assassination by a high-ranking government official created a power vacuum, which General Chun Doo-Hwan seized upon to stage a coup. However, far from restoring stability, the coup ushered in a period of intensified repression, epitomized by the brutal suppression of citizens in the Gwangju massacre.[11] Widespread public outrage ensued, fueled by dissatisfaction with the government's actions. It was not until 1987, when President Roh Tae-woo, a former colleague of Chun Doo-Hwan, was elected, that significant strides towards democracy were made. Roh's administration promised a more democratic constitution and initiated political reform efforts. The process culminated in the 1993 presidential election, which saw Kim Young-sam elected as the first civilian president in 30 years. Subsequently, South Korea embarked on a systematic process of democratic transition and transitional justice, including the prosecution of military leaders responsible for ordering attacks on civilians. These efforts garnered increased international recognition for South Korea.

South Korea's political trajectory serves as a vivid illustration of the fluctuations inherent in a developing political system en route to consolidated democracy. Overcoming the entrenched authoritarian regime in the 1990s, with a pivotal milestone in 1987, South Korea navigated through a series of political upheavals to emerge as a democratic nation. Various explanations have been posited to account for the enduring support for authoritarian regimes among the South Korean population. For instance, Uk Heo and Sung Deuk Hahm's work underscores the role of South Korea's political culture in impeding the growth of democratic institutions[12]

The behavioral approach and cultural model have emerged as primary frameworks for studying South Korean politics. However, significant strides have been made in the transition to democracy and in delivering justice to those repressed during the 40-year military dictatorship. This has sparked debates within South Korean politics, particularly concerning the methodological approaches to understanding governance in the new South Korea, with the neo-institutionalism approach gaining prominence. If we consider the work of Uk Heo and Sung Deuk Hahm as the pillars of the cultural model, Olli Hellmann [13] work also stands out as a key contribution to this discourse. These discussions, which have gained traction in the early 21st century, grapple with the complex questions that have arisen post-Cold War, particularly regarding electoral authoritarianism. Despite the forward march towards democracy since the 1990s, South Korean citizens continue to face multifaceted challenges. Subsequent sections will delve into the pivotal debates shaping contemporary South Korean politics.

3. Main arguments on South Korean Political Problems

If we accept Ian Pirie's assertion that neoliberal ideas began to dominate South Korean political economy in the 1980s, then South Korea stands as one of the early adopters of the Washington Consensus, a trend closely intertwined with the post-dictatorship political landscape characterized by regular elections. However, in the two decades since the turn of

the 21st century, a new discourse has emerged surrounding critical political issues in South Korea. These include: 1) the endurance of representative democracy; 2) the preservation of the principle of separation of powers among the executive, legislature, and judiciary; 3) the expansion of civil society, which both supports and opposes democracy, leading some scholars to label it as 'democratic decay [14]; and 4) the rise of populist politics.

The first issue concerns the durability of representative democracy in South Korea. This challenge emerged in the late 1990s, amidst celebrations over South Korea's transition from dictatorship to full democracy. However, as the country embarked on a systematic transition to democracy, new democratic dilemmas surfaced, notably electoral authoritarianism. Noteworthy works by scholars such as Richard Rose, Doh C. Shin, and Neil Munro[15] highlight a disjunction between the ideal of democracy and the political realities in South Korea. Despite a high proportion of educated citizens and the theoretical expansion of middle-class democracy, the post-Cold War era has witnessed instances of elected presidents abusing their power, with some facing corruption convictions for malfeasance. The severity of these governance challenges was exacerbated by the need to seek financial assistance from the International Monetary Fund during the 1997 economic crisis. This analysis aligns with Ian Pirie's observations regarding the dominance of neoliberal ideas in South Korea's political economy.

The second point pertains to the continuity of the first issue, namely the problem of the principle of separation of powers in South Korea. Despite constitutional limitations on presidential terms, a legacy inherited from the era of Park Chung Hee, the exercise of presidential authority remains overwhelming. This concentration of power in the South Korean presidency, often referred to as the 'Imperial Presidency,'[16] endows the president Park Geun-hye[17] with extensive powers, including the authority to declare a state of emergency, thereby constraining accountability mechanisms.

Jörg Michael Dostal identifies this phenomenon as a prevailing feature of the South Korean constitution since 1987. The 'Imperial Presidency,' granting the president supreme authority in both domestic and foreign policymaking, diverges significantly from the principle of separation of powers in the US context. Scholars generally concur that while the design of the South Korean constitution may align with democratic principles in theory, its application deviates in practice. In reality, attempts to diminish the oversight of political institutions such as the legislature and the centralization of executive power are evident. The restructuring of political institutions following each presidential election, based on political loyalties, further supports Dostal's argument. This dysfunctional presidency poses a significant obstacle to democratic development, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive constitutional reform.

The third point concerns the burgeoning of civil society in South Korea, encompassing both pro- and anti-democratic factions. As South Korea entered the 21st century, contentious politics and heightened polarization became increasingly evident, culminating in the outcome of the latest presidential election. In 2021, Yoon Suk Yeol, a former law graduate and South Korea's attorney general, emerged victorious as the leader of the People Power Party, advocating policies that diverge from liberal democratic ideals. In stark contrast to the tenure of Moon Jae-in, Yoon Suk Yeol's presidency prioritized market-oriented economic policies, tax cuts for the wealthy, the dissolution of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, and a shift towards 'strategic clarity' in relations with the US while adopting a stance against China-North Korea. This approach mirrors the guidelines followed by Park Geun-hye during his presidency[18]. Scholars have noted that Yoon Suk Yeol's ascent to power reflects the deepening polarization within the South Korean political landscape, exacerbated notably after 2010. Examining civil society through the lens of the transition to democracy reveals that previous academic studies predominantly emphasized the

positive aspects of civil society, overlooking its detrimental manifestations. However, under successive elections since the enactment of the 1987 constitution, subtle emergence of anti-democratic opposition has become apparent, with populist politics emerging as a key element.

The fourth issue concerns the rise of political populism in South Korea. While South Korea's transition to democracy appeared smooth and progressive under President Moon Jae-in, the victory of conservative leader Yoon Suk Yeol in 2022 has brought forth several new challenges. Scholars such as Sang Jin Han and Young Hee Shim[19] emphasize that South Korea is not immune to the perils of populism. Addressing these dangers necessitates sustained efforts to bolster the transparency and accountability of political institutions. Insights from Han and Shim's work underscore the integration of academic debates between cultural models and neo-institutionalism, highlighting the historical dimension and the review of the transition to democracy, which often overlooks dimensions such as hate politics, nationalism, and gender politics. Notably, Cynthia Enloe[20], an international politics scholar, has illuminated the neglect of gender issues in explanations of political change in South Korea and other countries, critiquing the male-centric narratives prevalent in the history of South Korean democracy. Enloe's work underscores the importance of amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, particularly female workers who endured oppression during the dictatorship but whose stories of resistance have been overlooked. Insook Kwon[21], influenced by Enloe's perspective, portrays the anti-military movement in South Korea as a conservative ideology and elucidates its role in the country's polarized politics. Kwon's work highlights the crucial role of women in resisting militarism and advocating for progressive democracy.

4. A summary of South Korean politics

Through a synthesis of debates on South Korean politics, it becomes evident that the country has undergone significant developments, particularly since the 1960s. A notable transformation occurred with the emergence of a new societal cohort, attributed to the political-economic changes of the preceding decades, including the student and labor movements, amid periodic interventions by the United States. However, scholarly discourse on this period was highly contested, particularly in the latter part of the 20th century, as South Korea grappled with increasingly complex challenges. These challenges included the haphazard amendment of the 1987 Constitution, the selective appraisal of civil society's role, polarization in politics, and the ascent of populism.

These factors have prompted a reevaluation of South Korea's political development, prompting scholars to delve deeper into previously overlooked issues such as anti-democratic civil society and gender politics. This reexamination has been facilitated by the application of political studies approaches, including cultural models and new institutionalism, to gain fresh insights into Korean politics. However, such approaches would not have been feasible without the backdrop of political crises experienced by South Korea, particularly in the past decade, challenging the prevailing explanations that have traditionally dominated the study of South Korean politics and governance.

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