

Introduction

Korean Democratization and Civil Society

In Korea, Burma, Taiwan, Thailand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and other countries, democracy has been frustrated at times, even suspended. Nevertheless, most of these countries have democratized, and in all of them, a resilient 'people power' has been demonstrated through elections and popular movements.

KIM DAE JUNG, 1994

The contribution of protest to Korean democracy cannot be overstated. . . . Particularly in the 1980s . . . Korean students, workers and young people brought into the public space uniquely original and autonomous configurations of political and social protest.

BRUCE CUMINGS, 1999

Korean Democratization

MORE than twelve years have passed since democratization began in earnest in South Korea (hereafter referred to as Korea) in 1987. During the past decade, there have been a number of prominent changes in Korean politics. First of all, political contestation has become much fairer.¹ Today, there are no longer undemocratic "gymnasium elections" (*ch'eyukkwan sŏn'gŏ*). Under the previous authoritarian regimes, the president was elected indirectly by members of the national electoral college, who gathered in a large athletic gymnasium and voted nearly unanimously for the designated authoritarian ruler. Since 1987, however, opposition party candidates' chances of getting elected have increased considerably, which explains in part the election of Kim Dae Jung, a longtime opposition leader who had run for the presidency four times, as president in 1997.

Furthermore, civil liberties have been substantially expanded.² The Basic Press Law (*Öllon kibonböþ*), a sophisticated and comprehensive system of press censorship enacted in 1980 by the Legislative Council for National Security (*Kukka powi ippöp hoeüi*), was abolished. A number of labor laws, which had severely restricted the exercise of labor rights, were overhauled. The dissident national peak association of labor unions, which had been outlawed and harshly suppressed by the preceding authoritarian regimes, was finally recognized by the government. The intelligence agency (National Intelligence Service, Kukchöngwön; formerly known as the National Security Planning Agency and originally called the Korea Central Intelligence Agency), which had served the past authoritarian regimes by monitoring opposition politicians and suppressing dissident movements, pledged to end domestic surveillance and to shift its focus to intelligence operations related to counterterrorism and foreign criminals who threaten the national security of Korea. Many political prisoners and prisoners of conscience were amnestied and released, which has noticeably improved Korea's international standing on human rights and political freedom.

In addition, civilian control over the military has been considerably augmented. Given that "elected officials must be able to exercise their constitutional powers without being subjected to overriding opposition from unelected officials," civilian control over the military is integral to the practice of democracy.³ The elite Hanahoe faction of the Korean Military Academy, whose members had intruded in politics under earlier authoritarian regimes, has been effectively subdued. Measures have been taken to downgrade the influence of the military's intelligence division, banning civilian surveillance and making a relatively low-ranking officer head the division. Numerous navy admirals and air force generals were discharged for accepting bribes to promote junior officers.⁴

With increased fairness in political contestation, expanded civil liberties, and augmented civilian control of the military, Korea has successfully accomplished its transition from authoritarian rule to democracy and has now become one of the leading nascent democracies in Asia.

Explaining Korean Democratization

Several different explanations have been presented about Korean democratization.⁵ Some have highlighted the role of external factors, particularly the posture and policies of the United States, in facilitating Korea's democratic

transition. According to this explanation, diplomatic maneuvers by the United States government, pro-democracy resolutions by the United States Senate and House, and the continued attention paid by the United States mass media to the “Korean crisis” significantly helped to prevent another military coup and promoted a smooth democratic transition in Korea in 1987.⁶ In this regard, the role of the United States in 1987 was somewhat similar to the one it had played in 1960, when the United States refused to give support to the civilian dictatorship of Syngman Rhee, which eventually resulted in Rhee’s resignation and a democratic transition in that same year.

Few would dispute the significance of international factors in Korea’s democratic transition. But most studies on Korean democratization to date have put a greater emphasis on domestic factors. External factors may have played an important role—but not a decisive or primary one. This also conforms with the prevailing consensus in the existing literature on democratization. Except for a few cases of “imposed democracy” resulting from, for example, a defeat in a war, external factors have played only a marginal and supplementary role in most of the cases in the recent wave of global democratization. The existing literature asserts that “the reasons for launching a transition can be found predominantly in domestic, internal factors.”⁷ The case of Korea, in fact, does not drastically deviate from this central finding in the existing literature. In other words, the democratic transition in Korea was largely a result of internal political developments.

Some of those espousing the primacy of domestic factors have argued that the democratic transition in Korea in 1987 was chiefly—if not entirely—driven by a series of elite calculations and interactions.⁸ The focus of this interpretation is the proposition of an eight-point democratization package made by Roh Tae Woo, the chairman of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, on June 29, 1987. According to such an elitist paradigm, the June 29 Declaration originated from and stood for a grand compromise between the softliners (*blandos*) and the hardliners (*duros*) in the ruling bloc. In other words, the transition was possible because the softliners, who believed that democratization was unavoidable, predominated over the hardliners. In this regard, what happened in Korea in 1987 surprisingly resembled what had happened earlier in some South European and Latin American countries. The dominant paradigm in the literature on democratic transition and consolidation, primarily based on South European and Latin America experiences, maintains that “there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequence of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally . . . between hardliners and

softliners.”⁹ The Korean case hence is another verification of the elitist paradigm that contends that “elite dispositions, calculations, and pacts . . . largely determine whether or not an opening [would] occur at all.”¹⁰

Serious criticisms have been raised, however, about the elitist paradigm in general and its application to the Korean case in particular. In general, the elitist paradigm has received objections for three reasons. One reason is because the visibility of elite interactions does not necessarily mean that they are causal. Also, excessive focus on elites tends to overlook the fact that elites’ interactions are subject to structural constraints. Furthermore, strategic choices that mass publics make sometimes prompt elites to move.¹¹

Whether there existed a genuine chasm between the hardliners and the softliners in the ruling bloc in Korea’s case remains extremely dubious.¹² Many analysts have argued that there was no serious split within the ruling bloc. Rather, the ruling regime at the time was quite united and resolved not to concede to the popular uproar for constitutional revision and democratization. Chun Doo Hwan’s power and influence in the ruling bloc stayed consistently strong and there were no visible anti-Chun “softliners” who dared to challenge or mitigate Chun’s recalcitrance.

Moreover, the elitist explanation of Korean democratization is unduly myopic in that it chooses to focus only on the immediate causes of the transition. On the surface, the democratic transition in Korea in 1987 was set in motion with the June 29 Declaration by the ruling elite. But it is misleading to assume that the elite’s decision, which immediately *preceded* the democratic transition, also *caused* it. Temporal proximity is entirely different from causality. The elitist explanation of Korean democratization tends to neglect, either intentionally or inadvertently, that there had been a series of massive, intense, and protracted pro-democracy popular movements prior to June 29, 1987. There were hundreds of public gatherings, street demonstrations, and signature-collection campaigns in 1986 and 1987, ultimately culminating in the June uprising in 1987. In June 1987 alone, millions of Koreans participated in these pro-democracy protest campaigns.

This is why, by far, most scholars of Korean democratization have subscribed to the view that Korea’s democratic transition was primarily mass-driven. According to this explanation, it was principally the civil society, “the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, and autonomous from the state,” that significantly facilitated, if not directly caused, various phases of democratization in Korea.¹³ In particular, analysts have emphasized that student groups, labor unions, and religious

organizations had waged intense pro-democracy struggles since the early 1970s. United under the leadership of several national umbrella organizations, these social groups mobilized a formidable democratic alliance against the authoritarian regime in 1987.¹⁴

In comparative perspective, therefore, the transition in Korea was different from some cases in Southern Europe and Latin America because conflicts, negotiations, and “pacts” among political elites were not the primary determinants of democratization. Rather, similar to the cases in some East European and African countries, it was the civil society groups that initiated and directed the entire process of democratization by forming a pro-democracy alliance within civil society, by creating a grand coalition with the opposition political party, and by eventually pressuring the authoritarian regime to yield to the “popular upsurge” from below.¹⁵

Themes and Organization of This Volume

The main purpose of this book is to develop and refine a civil society paradigm to analyze and explain the politics of democratization in Korea better. Although there has been a general consensus among Korean experts on the centrality of civil society in Korean democratization, so far there have been no serious attempts to establish and develop a comprehensive and systematic civil society framework. In this book, through a comparative-historical analysis of three “democratic junctures” in Korea, I demonstrate that Korean democratization has consistently been initiated and promoted by civil society groups. Groups in civil society significantly precipitated—if not directly caused—authoritarian breakdowns, facilitated democratic transitions, and, to a large extent, also determined the dynamics of posttransitional politics in democratic consolidation.¹⁶ I particularly focus on how and why the pro-democracy alliance of civil society groups became more extensive, more organized, and more powerful over the three selected periods.

In chapter 2, which is a theoretical and conceptual chapter, I first review the intellectual and historical context in which civil society emerged as a critical variable in the study of democratic transition and consolidation. Then, after briefly discussing the definitions of democracy, democratization, and civil society, I present a synopsis of the case, the argument, and the analytical framework. In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I examine the Korean case in detail. Specifically, I analyze the role of civil society in three different “democratic junctures”: 1956–1961, 1973–1980, and 1984–1987. In each chapter, I first describe the in-

ternal configuration of civil society at the given period, focusing on important cross-temporal changes. The role of civil society groups in authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition is reviewed next. Then I explain the role of civil society in democratization according to my analytical framework. In chapter 6, I examine the current stage of Korean democratization, highlighting how civil society has been transformed after the democratic transition and how the transformed civil society, in turn, has affected the ongoing democratic consolidation since 1988. Finally, in chapter 7, based on the empirical findings in chapters 3 through 6, I discuss some theoretical implications of the Korean case and reflect on the future of civil society and democracy in Korea.