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# Contested politics in South Korea

Democratic evolution,  
national identity and  
political partisanship

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## Summary

- Academic and policy analysts are sharply divided over the strength and durability of representative democracy in South Korea.
- Institutionally, the Republic of Korea (ROK) possesses structural features that should, in principle, provide for a reliable and representative democratic process. These structures include: a written constitution; the separation of powers between the presidential executive, a unicameral National Assembly and a functioning judiciary; a diverse media; and a system of local and national elections governed by a distinct and transparent regulatory process.
- However, there is a persistent tendency by voters and activists on both the right and left of politics to rely on mass-based protest to challenge leaders' perceived (and actual) deficiencies, which include corruption, poor decision-making, excessive partisanship and a willingness to abuse the power of the presidency. This has encouraged some observers to argue that the country is in the grip of 'democratic decay'.
- International surveys suggest that South Korea still lags behind other comparable liberal democratic polities in terms of press freedom, political rights and individual autonomy.
- The shortcomings of the country's contemporary democracy are 'path-dependent' – a function of a highly contested post-1945 political history in which elites, both on the left and the right, have relied on cultural norms of deference, divisive identity politics and the institutions of politics to exclude opponents and narrow the political spectrum to limit voter choice.
- The wider context of the Cold War division of the Korean peninsula and the security threat from North Korea had limited the ability of the US, South Korea's alliance partner, to effect lasting democratic change in South Korea.
- The rhetoric of identity politics remains powerful, but it appears to be less salient than in the past in influencing political outcomes. The results of the March 2022 presidential election, one of the closest in the country's history, suggest that economic considerations (particularly concern over rising wealth and income inequality) are increasingly important in shaping the choices of voters, who may be becoming more independent and less partisan than in the past.
- Notwithstanding the smooth transition from the progressive administration of President Moon Jae-in to the conservative administration of President Yoon Suk-seol following the 2022 election, the bitterness of recent political rhetoric and the tendency of politicians to frame political choices in divisive, moralistic terms of 'good versus evil' suggest that South Korea is not immune from the dangers of populism.
- Guarding against these dangers requires continued efforts to strengthen the transparency and accountability of political institutions. It requires a willingness by political leaders, public commentators and voters to recognize and accept the legitimacy of opposing political views, and to engage constructively even where they disagree over policies.

## 1. Introduction

The gradual emergence of the Republic of Korea (ROK) as a modern liberal democratic nation state is a product of struggle and resistance. This can be seen in a number of key instances, including: popular and student-led national independence opposition (via the 1919 March 1st movement) to the colonial forces of Japan during the pre-1945 period; the post-liberation civil war between progressive and conservative forces from 1945 to 1950; the ideological and strategic conflict between North and South Korea during the Korean War, 1950–53; and the longer contest between the forces of authoritarianism and democracy that defined much of the post-1945 period, particularly between 1961 and 1987.<sup>1</sup>

Rapid post-war economic development fostered a process of modernization, including mass education, social awareness and the development of a prosperous middle class, that arguably contributed to the emergence of South Korea as one of contemporary Asia's most successful democracies. Invited (along with Australia and India) to the 2021 G7 summit in the UK as part of a wider democratic group of nations (the D10),<sup>2</sup> South Korea also was one of the first countries to hold successful national elections in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The National Assembly elections of April 2020 saw the governing Democratic Party of Korea win a decisive three-fifths majority of seats (180 out of 300) in the country's unicameral parliament on the back of a record 66 per cent turnout that suggested strong public engagement with the democratic process.<sup>3</sup>

A further sign of democratic activism is the remarkable experience of late 2016, when cumulatively some 17 million South Koreans, over a three-month period, gathered in Seoul's Gwanghwamun district (close to the presidential Blue House) to protest against corruption associated with the administration of the then president, Park Geun-hye – this striking example of mass politics and the ability of citizens to hold their leaders to account led to the president's impeachment by the National Assembly and her eventual removal from office in March 2017.<sup>4</sup>

Taken at face value, South Korea is a consolidated democracy<sup>5</sup> with many of the structural features that are evidence of effective governance. These include: a codified separation of powers between a national legislature (elected every four years), a strong presidential executive (limited to a single five-year term), and a constitutionally defined legal framework (with a process of judicial review via the country's constitutional and supreme courts); diverse print, television

<sup>1</sup> For a useful survey of these developments, see Robinson, M. E. (2007), *Korea's Twentieth-Century Odyssey*, Honolulu, Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press.

<sup>2</sup> The D10 originated from a US State Department concept in 2008, evolving into a 'D-10 Strategy Forum' comprising the world's leading democracies and intended to strengthen the rules-based international order. See <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/programs/scowcroft-center-for-strategy-and-security/global-strategy-initiative/democratic-order-initiative/d-10-strategy-forum>.

<sup>3</sup> McCurry, J. (2020), 'South Korea votes in first national election of coronavirus era', *Guardian*, 14 April 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/south-korea-votes-in-first-national-election-of-coronavirus-era>; Holingsworth, J. and Kwon, J. (2020), 'South Korea sees the largest turnout in almost 30 years in election held during coronavirus outbreak', CNN online, 16 April 2020, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/15/asia/south-korea-election-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Kang, S.-G. (2019), 'Candelight demonstrations and the presidential impeachment in South Korea', *Asian Education and Development Studies*, vol. 8, 3, p. 256.

<sup>5</sup> Writing in 2000, a group of South Korean and US scholars cautiously endorsed the idea of gradual political progress in South Korea but noted their 'concern about the quality, depth, and cultural rootedness of democracy in South Korea'. See Diamond, L. and Kim, B. (eds) (2000), *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*, Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, p. 5.

and social media; and an engaged citizenry that participates in the political process via membership of labour unions, religious and social associations, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and via large-scale public demonstrations by groups both on the left and right of politics.

However, there are multiple reasons to question the extent to which democratic norms and procedures have become firmly established in practice. Qualitative and quantitative surveys of South Korea's democratic culture, by organizations such as Freedom House, Reporters Without Borders and the V-Dem project, have frequently ranked the country low relative to other comparable democracies in terms of indicators that include press freedom, individual autonomy and political rights. For example, during President Park's tenure from 2013 to 2017, Reporters Without Borders ranked South Korea 60th out of 180 countries for press freedom.<sup>6</sup> More generally, since the most recent transition from authoritarian, military-led government to democracy in 1987, the country has, in the words of one recent analysis, '... unequivocally advanced, but it has not reached the upper tier status of advanced democracies'.<sup>7</sup> Other observers have suggested that South Korea has been susceptible to a pronounced risk of 'democratic backsliding'.<sup>8</sup>

## **Common to populist movements is a form of political activity motivated by anger, perceived inequalities, distrust of governing elites and intolerance of the views of rival political groups.**

Some critics go even further, interpreting contemporary political patterns as indicative of a crisis of democracy. Professor Gi-Wook Shin of Stanford University suggests that South Korea is in the grip of a 'democratic depression' or 'decay', and that it is grappling with the destabilizing forces of populist politics similar to those currently evident in many liberal democratic polities. Likening this phenomenon to a disease, rather than categorizing it as a temporary aberration or as evidence of a gradual evolution of democratic norms, Shin underlines the prevalence of a 'zero-sum politics, in which opponents are demonized, democratic norms are eroded, and political life grows ever more polarised'.<sup>9</sup> The metaphor of disease is particularly apt when discussing populism, a phenomenon that resists clear theoretical definition but which many observers consider a 'pathological'<sup>10</sup> weakening of a country's democratic culture, institutions<sup>11</sup> and norms. Common to populist movements is a form of political activity motivated by anger, perceived inequalities, distrust of governing elites, and intolerance – or at times outright rejection – of the views of rival political groups. Protest *per se* is not enough

<sup>6</sup> Hahm, S.-D. and Uk, H. (2018), 'The First Female President in South Korea: Park Geun-hye's Leadership and South Korean Democracy', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, vol. 53, 5, p. 650.

<sup>7</sup> Yeo, A. (2020), 'Has South Korean democracy hit a glass ceiling? Institutional-cultural factors and limits to democratic progress', *Asian Politics and Policy*, vol. 12, 4, p. 545.

<sup>8</sup> Kizeková, A. and Roy, R. (2022), 'Democracy Promotion', in Pacheco Pardo, R. et al. (2022), *South Korea-EU Global Cooperation in Governance*, Brussels School of Governance, Brussels, Belgium, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Shin, G.-W. (2020), 'South Korea's Democratic Decay', *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, 3, pp. 101 and 111.

<sup>10</sup> Dunn, J. (2018), 'The Challenge of Populism', unpublished talk given at Seoul National University, 31 May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the erosion of the institutional 'guardrails' of democracy, see Levitsky, S. and Ziblatt, D. (2018), *How Democracies Die*, London, UK: Penguin.



to mark a movement as populist in form. The critical ingredient is an exclusive sense of who the legitimate ‘people’ are in a given political (typically national) setting, often based on historical narratives of collective identity rooted in myth, questionable historical evidence and appeals to emotion at the expense of rational analysis.<sup>12</sup>

Other observers are, by contrast, more positive about the resilience of South Korea’s democratic values, pointing instead to a robust pluralism in the political discourse and to the importance of citizen-led activism as a barometer of healthy political engagement. Such positions nonetheless acknowledge the institutional limitations and politically regressive instincts (on the part of some political actors) that South Korea, in keeping with other liberal democracies, has faced in recent years.<sup>13</sup>

The following analysis seeks to make sense of this contradictory set of evidence in order to assess the strengths and limitations of democratic governance in contemporary South Korea, while also setting the current situation against the backdrop of past political developments in the post-1945 period. South Korean politics today can be described as heavily ‘path-dependent’<sup>14</sup> that is, shaped by institutional innovations from earlier eras but also by cultural norms and competing visions of the nation that continue to affect political discourse and behaviour. Institutional imperfections and entrenched identities can amplify the rivalry and competition inherent to the process of democratic contestation, but it remains an open question whether South Korea has yet succumbed to populism, particularly in terms of any retreat into an intentionally exclusionary and anti-pluralist view of national legitimacy and rigid definitions of what constitutes ‘the people’.

Debates over competing narratives of the past in South Korea remain fierce, and there is still a partisan tendency among some (though not all) politicians to frame their opponents as illegitimate and not representative of national norms. Moreover, there are instances (detailed below) in which the institutions of government have been weaponized to discredit or marginalize political opponents. These patterns are not dissimilar qualitatively to the populist politics of other democracies (for example, the US under Donald Trump, or India under the leadership of Narendra Modi<sup>15</sup>), but results from the latest presidential contest in 2022 suggest that the South Korean electorate is able to remain dispassionate in making its electoral choices and that voters are willing to move beyond some of the bitter divisions of the past.

Notwithstanding this positive trend, history still matters. It might seem counterintuitive to devote so much time to the past in order to understand modern-day politics in South Korea, but there is compelling evidence to suggest that earlier developments – including institutional innovations, past competitions

<sup>12</sup> For a recent example of this rapidly expanding field of research by one of its leading analysts, see Müller, J.-W. (2021), *Democracy Rules*, London, UK: Random House, pp. 6–7.

<sup>13</sup> For a valuable example, see Moberand, E. (2021), ‘Prosecution reform and the politics of faking democracy in South Korea’, *Critical Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2.

<sup>14</sup> For a valuable and comprehensive analysis of the development of South Korean politics post-1945, see Moberand, E. (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, p. 11. Moberand focuses on the institutional limitations of South Korean politics and the pattern of conservative elite collusion to restrict participation in the political process by a wide range of progressive political forces. This paper’s analysis draws heavily on some of the highly original insights in Moberand’s work.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, on the US, Jacobs, L. R. (2022), *Democracy Under Fire: The Rise of Extremists and the Hostile Takeover of the Republican Party*, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press; and, on India, Jafferlot, C. (2021), *Modi’s India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

for political power, and not fully resolved debates over identity politics – continue to shape, sometimes decisively, the political landscape. South Korea is not alone in being influenced by recent history (Japanese politics, for example, is similarly shaped by the legacy of the past). But without a detailed appreciation of these influences, it is difficult to understand the choices of voters and leaders, as well as the country's policies at home and abroad.

## 2. South Korea's democratic evolution

South Korea's post-war democratic development has passed through five distinct stages:

- i. A period of democratic innovation and experimentation that might be best characterized as *illiberal democracy* from 1945 to 1960, bookmarked by liberation from Japanese colonialism and by the student- and academic-led 'April Revolution' of 1960 which ended Rhee Syngman's presidency.
- ii. A decade of *democratic authoritarianism* from 1961 to 1972, following the 16 May 1961 military coup engineered by Park Chung-hee.
- iii. The imposition of more explicit restrictions on political liberty marked by the promulgation of the Yushin Constitution in 1972, introducing a period of *authoritarian exceptionalism* and accelerated economic growth. This period, which also saw the assassination of Park in 1979 and his eventual succession by General Chun Doo-hwan, culminated in the transition to civilian-led democratic governance in 1987.
- iv. A gradual entrenchment of democratic norms and practices from 1987 to 2001, covering approximately the presidencies of Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, which can be characterized as *democratic paternalism*.
- v. And finally the period from 2002 to the present, notable for a form of increased *participatory democracy* in which the use of social media, the effects of modern technology and regularized public demonstrations suggest a partial dilution of the power of traditional political elites.

### Culture, institutions, identity norms and geopolitics as drivers of political change

Such classifications invariably simplify to a degree, but they are analytically useful in revealing some of the key factors relevant to making sense of the nature and pace of democratic change in South Korea. Three sets of influences can be discerned as having had a bearing on this process, namely: cultural and social norms (particularly Confucian norms of hierarchy and deference) on the part of citizens towards their leaders; institutional rules governing elections, political parties and the nature of presidential power; and wider contextual and geopolitical factors, particularly the impact of the Cold War, alliance relations with the US and the persistent existential risk posed by North Korea.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*.

It would be a mistake to think of democratic change in South Korea as a linear process. Frequently, political change, whether engineered from below or above, has produced reactions and counter-reactions on the parts of both elites and the governed. There is, in effect, a revolutionary and counter-revolutionary dynamic animating much political change in the country, which can complicate the process of discerning the motivations and goals of some of the actors involved.<sup>17</sup> A further complication is the tendency of different political actors – both progressive and conservative – to appropriate explicitly the rhetoric of ‘democracy’ and ‘legitimacy’ to bolster their own political authority.

## Many have remained suspicious of the past role of the US in supporting authoritarian leaders in South Korea, ostensibly in the interests of prioritizing security over democracy.

Also part of this pattern is the presence of a pronounced oppositional dynamic centred around competing narratives of national identity, which has often shaped the thinking of actors on the right and left of the political spectrum. Conservatives have tended to prioritize the importance of rapid, state-led economic developmentalism, coupled with strong alliance ties with the US and a hawkish disposition towards North Korea. Progressives, by contrast, have been more receptive to engagement with the North, a posture often closely associated with the *sunshine policy* of Kim Dae-jung.<sup>18</sup> They have stressed the critical importance of advancing and sustaining the democratization agenda and resistance to authoritarianism at home. Many have remained suspicious of the past role of the US in supporting authoritarian leaders in South Korea, ostensibly in the interests of prioritizing security over democracy.<sup>19</sup>

Over time, this binary opposition around identity politics has begun to blur, as generational change and the solidification of democratic norms have moderated the urgency behind past efforts to resist domestic authoritarian impulses. Politicians on the right and left alike have recognized the importance of bolstering security policies to counter both persistent threats (North Korea) and newly emerging security challenges (for example, a more assertive and militarily powerful People’s Republic of China).

<sup>17</sup> Moberand (2021), ‘Prosecution reform and the politics of faking democracy in South Korea’, p. 260.

<sup>18</sup> For more on the sunshine policy, see Moon, C. and Swenson-Wright, J. (eds) (2014), *Crisis of Peace and New Leadership in Korea*, Seoul, ROK: Yonsei University Press. Such divisions between conservatives and progressives, while important, are not rigidly fixed. There have been instances in which progressive presidents have enjoyed support from conservative politicians and vice versa, but the left–right split has been and continues to be significant, although arguably the importance of these divisions appears to have declined over time. Also, it is worth keeping in mind that every president since Park Chung-hee has attempted some form of *de facto* engagement with North Korea even if the terminology of ‘engagement’ has not always been applied.

<sup>19</sup> Kim, H. and Sorensen, C. W. (2011), *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee era, 1961-1979*, Seattle, WA: University of Seattle Press, pp. 9–11.



### **i. Illiberal democracy, 1945–60**

**Key characteristics: factionalism, personalized leadership, and reliance on corruption, institutional manipulation and coercive power to marginalize political opposition.**

Post-1945 South Korean politics was dominated by factionalism and rivalry between progressive and conservative political forces that mirrored in part the artificial division of the country between North and South Korea established at the 38th parallel. Contributing to this confusing environment was a US military administration, headed by General John R. Hodge, that lacked any informed understanding of local conditions. Indeed, the administration had early on sparked suspicion and resentment on the part of many Koreans by allowing former Japanese colonial administrators to remain in post in the aftermath of Japan's defeat in August 1945.

With the US and the Soviet Union agreeing to the temporary division of the Korean peninsula, supervised by a joint commission, at the Moscow Conference of Foreign Ministers in 1945, but failing to settle on how best and when to administer a common trusteeship over the peninsula, the South's hope of regaining a modicum of political sovereignty was delayed until 1948 and the elections to the First Republic.

Politics during this period was dominated by the personality of Rhee Syngman, the country's first president and eventual leader of the governing Liberal Party, established in 1951. Rhee's success in securing the presidency was in part based on a combination of clientelism, corruption and reliance on the support of the landed aristocracy and prominent business elites, represented by the Korea Democratic Party. Both Democrats and Liberals were conservative nationalists who shared a common opposition to communism and the forces of progressivism represented by the people's committees that emerged across Korea in the aftermath of Japan's defeat and by the short-lived People's Republic of Korea (September–December 1945), which was proscribed by Hodge early on during the US administration.

The absence of any well-established tradition of democratic governance in the 35-year period (1910–45) when Japan had administered Korea as a colonial possession, together with the bitter factionalism between competing Korean political actors, bolstered Rhee's highly centralized and personalized system of rule. This made it all but impossible for the US to put in place a working system of democratic government in the period leading up to the 1948 elections.

Rhee's virulent anti-communism and authoritarian predisposition encouraged him to use fraud and intimidation to eclipse his rivals. It also emboldened him to deploy coercive police power, most notably in brutally suppressing both the Jeju uprising of 1948 and comparable attempts by progressive forces to resist the division of the peninsula. Bolstering state power was achieved not only through violent repression, however, but also through legislative initiatives intended to undermine, discredit, imprison and in some cases proscribe political actors, both individuals and political parties. The introduction of a National Security Act in 1948, modelled on Japan's repressive 1925 Public Security

Preservation Law,<sup>20</sup> gave Rhee sweeping powers to purge progressive rivals from politics by banning activities that could be deemed to undermine state security. Similarly, Rhee's Liberal Party colluded with the Democrats to undermine the Progressive Party, whose candidate, Cho Pong-am, had performed well in the 1956 presidential elections, but who was subsequently indicted and executed on fabricated charges of having spied for North Korea.<sup>21</sup>

Rhee's political longevity was also secured through selective constitutional revisions (a repeated tactic deployed by subsequent South Korean leaders) intended to side-step term limits on the presidency, and through measures passed in collusion with the Korea Democratic Party in 1958 to restrict campaign activities that would favour parties with more grassroots, mass appeal such as the Progressive Party.<sup>22</sup>

Ultimately, Rhee's pattern of corruption and collusion led to mass student protests (the 'April Revolution') in response to the government's efforts to rig the 1960 presidential elections and its heavy-handed attempts to repress demonstrations. With the US little inclined to support him, and amid poor economic growth and strong popular opposition, Rhee stepped down and went into political exile in the US. This ushered in a brief period of democratic transition (the Second Republic), and limited constitutional revision, including the establishment of a prime ministerial rather than a presidential system of government, before the 1961 coup orchestrated by Park Chung-hee swept aside the country's governing elites.

## ii. Democratic authoritarianism, 1961–72

**Key characteristics: military intervention and strategic necessity, anti-corruption initiatives, centralized economic modernization, emphasis on building a strong state.**

The short-lived nature of the Second Republic was in part the result of what, to some observers, was a chronic pattern of factional rivalry and a social predisposition towards hierarchical deference (underscored by Confucian values) and the absence of well-established norms of democratic competition or an established and stable party system.<sup>23</sup> Yet while corruption, highly personalized competition and disdain for mass engagement were all prevalent within the political leadership, it is arguably overly simplistic to see culture as having been the primary determinant of political disorder in South Korea. Park's coup, which had significant appeal within certain sections of the population (especially within rural communities), was relatively bloodless. It was justified by its military leaders as an effort to counter corrosive immorality in public life, offset economic mismanagement and shore up the country's defences in the face of a North Korea that seemed at this juncture politically, militarily and economically more resilient and dynamic than the South. Park sought to portray South Korea's political elites

<sup>20</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, p. 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>23</sup> For an influential early analysis that stressed the structural and cultural shortcomings of South Korean society as a cause of the country's democratic vulnerability, see Henderson, G. (1968), *The Politics of the Vortex*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

as effete and ineffectual and, in particular among those on the left who succeeded Rhee, as potentially pro-North Korean. At the same time, the coup's leaders were motivated by self-interest, seeking to protect their own positions and status within the military amid rivalry with more senior officers.<sup>24</sup>

Importantly, the longevity of Park's leadership derived from a variety of practical measures quite independent of any putative anti-democratic cultural norms that might have shaped attitudes towards his regime. Staying in power depended not only on coercion and police- and military-sanctioned violence, but also on economic developmentalism (involving technocratic bureaucratic planning, promotion of industrial conglomerates or *chaebol*, and heavy reliance on US economic and military support within the context of the Cold War). It also, critically, depended on careful management and manipulation of the institutional framework of politics, in part via constitutional revisions that marked the establishment of the Third Republic. Erik Mobernd of Seoul National University has persuasively characterized this as the construction of a '1963 system' in which the government relied on a panoply of legal and bureaucratic measures – including the 1963 Political Parties Act, the establishment of a Central Election Management Committee (CEMC), and the abolition of local elections – to restrict the electoral process and effectively neuter or constrain meaningful opposition. Of course, this did not represent a complete break from past conventions. Park, like Rhee before him, was happy to use state power via the medium of his governing Democratic Republican Party to buy votes and thereby undermine support for the opposition.<sup>25</sup>

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The wider international context was also enormously important. Park's high-growth economic developmentalism model was heavily patterned on Japan's economic success. The normalization of relations with Japan in 1965 provided South Korea with much-needed economic resources, in the form of some \$800 million worth of direct financial assistance to fuel what came to be known as the 'Miracle on the Han River'. This in turn secured the support of an emerging middle class of South Korean consumers eager to embrace the new post-war prosperity.<sup>26</sup> Economic growth contributed to enhanced strategic stability, a critical concern to the US, South Korea's alliance patron, at a time when the developing

<sup>24</sup> Cumings, B. (2005), *Korea's Place in the Sun*, New York, NY: Norton, chapter 7, pp. 342–404.

<sup>25</sup> Mobernd (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, p. 40.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of Park's economic policies, see Tadashi, K. (2011), 'The Cold War and the Political Economy of the Park Chung Hee regime', in Kim and Sorensen (2011), *Reassessing the Park Chung Hee era, 1961-1979*, pp. 66–85.

war in Vietnam (especially after 1965) and wider Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union and China encouraged Washington to prioritize security over democratic reform in its relations with Seoul.<sup>27</sup>

Significantly, Park was careful (in a pattern that can be discerned in later political periods by politicians of both the left and right) to embrace the language of democracy – intentionally associating, for example, the coup of 1961 with the April Revolution of 1960 that had brought down the Rhee government.<sup>28</sup> Commanding the rhetoric of politics was arguably as important as institutional innovation in building a durable façade of democracy.

### iii. Authoritarian exceptionalism, 1972–87

#### **Key characteristics: muzzling the opposition, redefining democracy in Korean terms, growth of mass protest.**

Notwithstanding the diversity of techniques available to Park in maintaining control, the emergence of vocal and effective opposition figures such as Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam – who were increasingly able to mount credible challenges to the government (most notably in the 1971 presidential election) – encouraged Park to tighten state control. In 1972, Park introduced sweeping political restrictions, branded as the ‘revitalizing’ or Yushin Constitution.<sup>29</sup> Direct elections to the presidency were replaced with an indirect system in which the National Assembly, now populated with a mix of appointed and elected officials, acted as a rubber-stamp for Park, who was effectively empowered to rule unchallenged without any need to submit himself periodically to even a nominally democratic electoral process. This new, Fourth Republic marked a distinct shift to a more explicitly authoritarian system of control. It was reinforced by measures banning the two Kims from politics, as well as periodic deployment of the power of South Korea’s intelligence service, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, to intimidate political opponents.

Park also sought to legitimize his more repressive rule by framing it in terms of cultural exceptionalism – not only as demonstrated by the technocratic success of state capitalism, but also via measures to strengthen rural development in ways consistent with earlier norms of local communalism and a paternalistic approach to local needs. The ‘new village’ (*saemaul*) movement, dating from 1970 and

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<sup>27</sup> During Park’s time in office, for example, South Korea provided troops and resources to enable military personnel to fight alongside US troops in Vietnam – a practical but also symbolically important demonstration of Asian backing for a war that the Lyndon Johnson administration worried risked being characterized as a white man’s colonial conflict. Of course, US policy was not undifferentiated and was not solely focused on strategic concerns. At different points in the post-war period, the US sought to offset authoritarianism in the South, whether by qualifying levels of economic support, intervening to protect vulnerable opposition politicians (most notably, Kim Dae-jung) from state repression or the periodic risk of assassination (in 1973) or execution on trumped up charges of treason (in 1980), providing long-term support for educational development in the South, or making innovative attempts at cross-cultural engagement through organizations such as the US Peace Corps. For a detailed account of the US–South Korea relationship, see Brazinsky, G. (2007), *Nation Building in South Korea. Koreans, Americans and the Making of a Democracy*, Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press.

<sup>28</sup> Mbrand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, p. 31.

<sup>29</sup> Yushin was a direct translation of *Isshin* (or ‘restoration’), the Japanese term associated with the Meiji Restoration of 1868 in which Japan’s political oligarchs introduced modernizing reforms effecting Japan’s transition to a centralized, modern state. Park’s selection of the term reflected his wish to emulate Japan, fostered by his own experience working for the Japanese colonial state as a member of the Japanese military. However, in substance the political changes of 1972 in South Korea bore little resemblance to the reforms of 1868 in Japan.

continuing for much of the decade,<sup>30</sup> was an attempt to promote an indigenous and unique form of national ‘democracy’ that conflicted with the universalism of liberal democratic norms. The movement was not dissimilar to more recent efforts by authoritarian leaders elsewhere<sup>31</sup> to justify repression and control.

Over time, however, Park’s restrictions fuelled opposition, particularly via street demonstrations and industrial action, by a broad coalition of actors, including students, labour unions and the Catholic church, that collectively represented an increasingly emboldened form of mass, popular politics. The strength of this ‘Minjung’ movement sparked disruptive demonstrations against the government, beginning in the south of the country, and ultimately acted as the catalyst for Park’s assassination by his national intelligence chief, Kim Jae-gyu, in October 1979.<sup>32</sup>

After a brief interregnum of a few weeks, in which the country seemed poised to return to democratic rule, Major General Chun Doo-hwan seized power in a military coup in December, instituting a pattern of unambiguously authoritarian rule that was in some respects more brutal and repressive than the Park era. A clear indicator of the new regime’s willingness to use violence to maintain its authority was the state-led repression of a popular uprising in the southwestern city of Gwangju in May 1980. Hundreds of civilians, and potentially as many as 2,000 (the precise figure is contested), including large numbers of student protesters, were killed by national guard soldiers and special paratroopers deployed to suppress demonstrations against the imposition of martial law by the government. The Gwangju uprising was not only a seminal moment in the long South Korean struggle for democracy. It also for years after continued to divide progressives and conservatives, with the former emphasizing its importance as a catalyst for positive political change and the latter more inclined to view it as an insurrection led by subversive communist forces, with possible encouragement from North Korea – a misleading narrative that the Chun administration actively disseminated at the time.

#### **iv. Democratic paternalism, 1987–2001**

**Key characteristics: middle-class anti-authoritarianism, institutional reform, elite civil–military compromise.**

The Gwangju uprising would eventually act as a rallying point for continuing student-led protests and a sustained campaign for democracy that continued throughout the 1980s. This contributed to the eventual retirement from politics by Chun, and to his replacement as president, via the election of 1987, by Roh Tae-woo. Roh was a former military officer who had served under Chun but who had succeeded in nominally distancing himself from the military dictatorship

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<sup>30</sup> The ‘new village’ movement continued under Park’s successor, Chun Doo-hwan, but with much less momentum as the South Korean economy experienced high rates of economic growth.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, the efforts by Xi Jinping’s government to defend China’s system of rule in culturally distinctive terms. Jun, M. (2021), ‘Xi Jinping says China’s ‘democratic’ political system is a ‘great creation’ that holds key to international success’, *South China Morning Post*, 21 October 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/politics/article/3152389/xi-jinping-says-chinas-democratic-political-system-great>.

<sup>32</sup> For an extended discussion of this movement, see Lee, N.-H. (2007), *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

associated with Chun's Fifth Republic by presenting himself as a reformer capable of appealing to the political opposition. Chun's decision to step down was in part the result of growing middle-class disaffection with the government and the fear that renewed student protests would jeopardize the Seoul Olympics scheduled for 1988, a key moment that was hoped would herald South Korea's increased global stature.<sup>33</sup>

Following his election, Roh made good on his pledge of political liberalization by working with opposition politicians to draft a new constitution in 1988. This led to a number of key reforms, including direct election of the president and the reinstatement of local government, and marked the beginning of the Sixth Republic. Reform, however, was partial and remained a top-down process. Importantly, many of the institutional innovations associated with Park's democratic authoritarianism – including the 1963 Political Parties Act and the CEMC – remained unchanged, as did the National Security Act of 1948. The state, therefore, continued to have tools with which to limit the emergence of new centres of political opposition or the growth of genuinely mass-based political parties.

**Political leaders, whether from the progressive or conservative camps, were inclined to legitimize and defend their authority in terms that were highly personal and frequently designed to circumscribe and narrow rather than widen the space for political contestation.**

In aggregating power to itself, the Roh administration could also count on personal rivalry between his main democratic opponents, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, and the tendency of the Minjung movement to favour solidarity and extra-parliamentary action over electoral reform and institutional changes that would have strengthened democratic governance.<sup>34</sup>

Throughout this period, the political culture of South Korea remained elitist and hierarchical. Political leaders, whether from the progressive or conservative camps, were inclined to legitimize and defend their authority in terms that were highly personal and frequently designed to circumscribe and narrow rather than widen the space for political contestation. Bodies such as the CEMC were staffed by lawyers and civil servants who continued to focus rigidly on limiting formal campaign violations, rather than on facilitating pluralism and debate. During the 1990s and early 2000s, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam maintained strong control over their parties by dominating the nomination process for candidates. For any potential party candidate, delivering financial resources to the senior leadership was often seen as a way of securing a nomination, a tendency that was at odds with the ethos of open and transparent participation.

<sup>33</sup> Brazinsky (2007), *Nation Building in South Korea*, p. 247.

<sup>34</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, p. 70.



The elites also maintained their control by capitalizing on the tendency of voting behaviour to be shaped by regional identity. Residents of the southwestern part of the country, known as Honam (comprising the regional districts of North and South Jeolla, and including Gwangju), typically identified with progressive political forces and especially the leadership of Kim Dae-jung (who was born in South Jeolla). By contrast, conservative voters tended to be disproportionately concentrated in the southeast of the country, in Yeongnam (made up of North and South Gyeongsang). This was the home region of Park Chung-hee, who had directed significant development resources to that part of the country at the expense of Jeolla.<sup>35</sup> Roh Tae-woo, for example, bolstered his standing against his rival, Kim Dae-jung, in the 1987 election by emphasizing the latter's links with Jeolla and reminding voters of past political uprisings from this region in order to imply that Kim was a revolutionary extremist.<sup>36</sup> Through such techniques of negative political framing, the contested narratives of countering subversion (a conservative, statist theme) versus democratic reform (a progressive motif) became entrenched as key political dividing lines, arguably more important than the cleavages of class or religion that have often been the basis for political alignment and party identification in other polities.<sup>37</sup>

## v. Participatory democracy, 2002 to the present

**Key characteristics: challenges to the establishment mainstream, the revival of identity and mass-based politics, corruption and the abuse of institutional power.**

### The Roh Moo-hyun phenomenon

It would be simplistic to assume that regionalism is the only, or indeed the pre-eminent, form of political identification in South Korean politics, or that left-right rivalry remained static and undifferentiated throughout the post-war period. Equally powerful are themes of reaction and counter-reaction, or more dramatically revolution and counter-revolution, and particularly the theme of mass participation against concentrated sectional interests – in the latter case, a popular reaction to elites on both the left and right of the political spectrum. The influence of the anti-elite dynamic was evident in the rise of Roh Moo-hyun as a presidential candidate for the Millennium Democratic Party in 2002, and in his subsequent victory in the presidential contest of the same year. Unusually for a progressive politician Roh hailed from Gyeongsang (a conservative region) rather than Jeolla, and was, atypically for a leading Korean politician in a society heavily steeped in the Confucian values of formal education, self-taught. Roh had been an active member of past student protests against the military. Despite being considered a member of the so-called '386 generation' (younger politicians born in the 1960s, educated in the 1980s, and reaching national political influence in their

<sup>35</sup> Cho, K. (1998), 'Regionalism in Korean Elections and Democratization: an empirical analysis', *Asian Perspective*, Spring 1998, vol. 22, 1, p. 145.

<sup>36</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, pp. 70–71.

<sup>37</sup> Note, for example, the familiar issues of class that have typically been at the heart of British politics, or the clerical–anticlerical divide in Republican France.

thirties),<sup>38</sup> he was able to present himself as an outsider. He differentiated himself not just against the conservatives, but also against progressive politicians such as Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam who had cooperated with Roh Tae-woo in the late 1980s in establishing the constitutional foundations of the Sixth Republic.

Roh Moo-hyun's career as a human rights lawyer helped him to present himself as the defender of the marginalized and the under-represented, and his political campaigns and term as president were heavily shaped by the idea of boosting civic participation in politics. Much of his campaign success in the 2002 presidential election was based on his ability to use social media to mobilize younger voters, and also on a strand of anti-Americanism that resonated with many on the progressive side of politics – further evidence of the continuing relevance of the left's opposition to Cold War alliance politics (and the associated policy of confronting North Korea). Roh also married his participatory focus with the idea of greater transparency in political life, declassifying historical archives to expose cases of past collaboration between conservative politicians and the former Japanese colonial administration in the pre-war period, as well as documenting how resources secured through the normalization of post-war relations with Japan in 1965 were used to fuel South Korea's economic boom during the authoritarian period, rather than to compensate the victims of the colonial era. In doing this, Roh was astutely able to use identity politics and historical controversies to put his conservative political opponents (most notably Park Geun-hye, the daughter of Park Chung-hee) on the defensive while embracing the principle of greater openness in political life.<sup>39</sup>

Unsurprisingly, Roh's outsider status prompted a counter-reaction from the political mainstream. Strikingly, in 2004, in part in response to Roh's creation of a new political party, the Uri Party ('Our Party'), the Millennium Democratic Party (now reduced in strength following the defection of pro-Roh members who backed Uri) joined forces with conservatives in the National Assembly to impeach the president on grounds that by voicing his support for Uri, Roh had violated strict election laws on impartiality. The impeachment provoked large-scale street demonstrations by Roh's supporters (a foreshadowing, albeit on a smaller scale, of the so-called 'candlelight movement' of 2016) and was eventually overturned by the constitutional court.

### **Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye: a conservative counter-revolution**

Uri's viability as a political party was undermined by Roh's shortcomings as president in tackling economic issues. A swing in public support against the government helped usher in two consecutive conservative presidencies, first under Lee Myung-bak (the former mayor of Seoul and later leader of the

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<sup>38</sup> The '386' reference was first used in the 1990s and was an allusion to the 386 microprocessor, at that time considered the leading edge in modern technology. By implication, the label suggested that politicians referred to in these terms were dynamic, innovative and future-oriented. As this cohort has aged, its members have subsequently been referred to as the '486' and most recently the '586' generation, but of course the semiconductor reference no longer is applicable. Roh was in fact born in 1946, but because of his values was long associated with the student radical generation that campaigned via street politics against the post-war authoritarian leadership of the country in the 1980s.

<sup>39</sup> Swenson-Wright, J. (2011), 'The Limits to 'Normalcy': Japanese-Korean post-Cold War interactions', in Welch, D. and Tadokoro, M. (eds) (2011), *Japan as a Normal Country*, Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, pp. 146–93.

conservative Grand National Party) from 2008 to 2013, and then under Park Geun-hye from 2013 to 2017. Both the Lee and Park administrations represented in some respects a counter-reaction away from participation towards greater political control and centralization. Lee, in particular, in a pattern that appeared to emulate the retaliatory and persecutory politics of the era of military government, used the office of the Supreme Prosecutor to target his progressive predecessor, investigating Roh and his family on charges of financial corruption. The process eventually prompted Roh's suicide in 2009, triggering a huge outpouring of public support for the late former president.

Critics of Lee viewed the investigation as a weaponizing of the instruments of state to weaken a political opponent, while opponents of Roh argued that the progressives were guilty of hypocrisy given the corruption allegations and the past efforts of the Roh administration to attack conservatives as self-serving elites.<sup>40</sup> The existence of two mutually irreconcilable interpretations of this controversy is emblematic of the intensity of division between conservative and progressive politicians and their supporters, and at the very least highlights the challenge of establishing clear standards of accountability and transparency in South Korean political life during this period. Ironically, Lee himself would later be charged with corruption in 2018 and eventually sentenced, after his presidency, to 15 years in prison.<sup>41</sup>

Park Geun-hye assumed the presidency in 2013, decisively elected to office with the largest victory of any post-authoritarian president in South Korea's history. She was also the first post-1987 president elected with an outright majority of votes rather than a simple plurality.<sup>42</sup> Strikingly, during much of her time in office, before the onset of the 'candlelight' protests in October 2016, Park enjoyed relatively high levels of popularity averaging 30 per cent. She embraced domestic policy goals that focused on promoting economic and social reform, industrial modernization, greater equality and job creation.<sup>43</sup> As a presidential candidate in 2012, Park had positioned herself in contrast to the outgoing Lee administration with its focus on neoliberal economic policies that promoted corporate interests, deregulation and a low-tax economy – policies often associated with conservative administrations in many advanced liberal democracies.

Park's more egalitarian welfare agenda appeared to address the interests of an increasingly vulnerable precariat – citizens who had been casualties of economic dislocation, including the impact of globalization, the long-term negative effects of the Asian financial crisis of 1997–98 and the 2008–09 global economic crisis, and the fiercely competitive South Korean higher education system and similarly brutally unforgiving labour markets. This focus on livelihoods or *minsaeng*<sup>44</sup> highlighted the sometimes fluid and imprecise nature of ideological labels in distinguishing between left and right, progressive and conservative, in early 21st-century South Korea. With the passage of time, and as South

<sup>40</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, pp. 128–29.

<sup>41</sup> Choe, S. (2018), 'Former South Korean president gets 15 years in prison for corruption', *New York Times*, 5 October 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/05/world/asia/lee-myung-bak-south-korea-convicted.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Hahn and Uk (2018), 'The First Female President in South Korea', p. 649.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 660.

<sup>44</sup> Yun, J.-W. (2019), 'Democracy in Myth: The Politics of Precariatization in South Korea', *Issues & Studies: A Social Science Quarterly on China, Taiwan and East Asian Affairs*, vol. 55, 1.

Korea's democratization had become more institutionally embedded, the old authoritarianism-versus-democracy binary that was so important in earlier eras was seemingly becoming less salient.

Not surprisingly, Park was keen to protect the legacy of her father's rule by acknowledging the substantive economic advances of his era. But she sought, albeit imperfectly, to do this in a relatively nuanced manner that recognized the repressive dimension of his leadership and the need to embrace the more recent democratic culture of post-authoritarian South Korea.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately for Park, her ability to deliver on her ambitious campaign promises, particularly bold welfare policies to promote generous universal pensions and the development of a 'creative economy', quickly ran into practical difficulties. This was amid growing tensions between, on the one hand, big business representatives and, on the other, labour unions and progressive civil associations. Park increasingly was perceived as rowing back on her promises and insincere in her aspirations.<sup>46</sup> Over time she suffered from a series of scandals involving her close confidante and adviser, Choi Soon-sil, who was discovered to have extracted bribes from major *chaebol* representatives to support private foundations. The perception that Park was increasingly remote and divorced from the realities of day-to-day politics, whether in managing presidential relations with the National Assembly or in engaging with the general public, gradually eroded the high hopes that Park would be a unifying force capable of bringing together the two broad wings of South Korea's historically divided and contentious identity politics.

## **With the passage of time, and as South Korea's democratization had become more institutionally embedded, the old authoritarianism-versus-democracy binary that was so important in earlier eras was seemingly becoming less salient.**

If anything, Park's actions once in power seemed to re-evolve the memory of authoritarian rule. Efforts to silence liberal critics by drafting blacklists of progressives in the arts and media, the use of the National Security Act to proscribe the left-of-centre United Progressive Party in 2013, and Park's apparent derelictions of duty during the tragic sinking of the *Sewol* passenger ship in April 2014 (involving the death of some 250 high-school students) reinforced the image not just of a remote head of government but of a leader who was willing to use power systematically to advance her own interests at the expense of the people.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> BBC News (2012), 'South Korea presidential runner Park apologises for father', 24 September 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-19697171>.

<sup>46</sup> Yun (2019), 'Democracy in Myth', pp. 12–14.

<sup>47</sup> *Korea JoongAng Daily* (2018), 'Seven hour mystery about Park, Sewol solved', 28 March 2018, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2018/03/28/politics/Sevenhour-mystery-about-Park-Sewol-solved/3046205.html>.

During the tenure of both Presidents Lee and Park, the state once again reasserted its control over the electoral process, adding further restrictions to campaigns, introducing measures to limit opportunities for local politicians to run for national office, and banning parties from establishing local branch offices – measures that collectively helped to limit the political opportunities for parties with a mass following.<sup>48</sup> Rule changes such as these could narrow the space for legitimate political competition but could be presented, superficially at least, as pragmatic initiatives. More troubling was the evidence of interventions intended to directly corrupt the electoral process, including claims that the National Intelligence Service may have distorted the presidential campaign of 2012 in favour of Park's candidacy via manipulation of the internet,<sup>49</sup> or via attempts to use strict defamation laws to punish individuals critical of Park and members of her family.<sup>50</sup>

The steady accumulation of news of Park's excessive reliance on Choi as her private confidante on major policy decisions (thanks to the investigative reporting of the JTBC television network), as well as corruption revelations and deepening public perceptions that the president was out of touch and insincere and ineffectual in promoting national welfare, contributed to an explosion of public anger in the autumn of 2016. This precipitated the impeachment process that led to her removal from office in March 2017, and to her eventual trial and sentencing in August 2018 to a 25-year prison term. The Choi scandal brought down not only the president, but also a score of officials in her administration, including Choi herself, Park's chief of staff, her former culture minister, the former health and welfare minister, the president's secretary for cultural and sports affairs, and a number of former intelligence directors. The scandal also implicated leaders of South Korea's *chaebol* who had provided bribes to the administration in response to Choi's interventions, including, most strikingly, Lee Jae-yong, the vice-chairman of Samsung Electronics.

### **Re-consolidating democracy? President Moon Jae-in and the persistence of adversarial, zero-sum politics**

Park Geun-hye's removal from office was the direct result of popular protest. This was not only a show of opposition to the president, but also critically important in persuading the National Assembly, including members of Park's own governing party (originally the Saenuri Party, but reconstituted as the Liberty Korea Party in February 2017<sup>51</sup>) to vote in favour of impeachment. Public opinion may also have been influential in persuading justices on the constitutional court to uphold the impeachment decision. It appears, therefore, that mass demonstrations rather than the institutions of government *per se* were the most important factor in limiting the authoritarian revival in South Korea's politics. Left to their own

<sup>48</sup> Moberand (2019), *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*, p. 130.

<sup>49</sup> Kang (2019), 'Candlelight demonstrations and the presidential impeachment in South Korea', p. 258.

<sup>50</sup> Yeo (2020), 'Has South Korean democracy hit a glass ceiling?', p. 547.

<sup>51</sup> The Saenuri Party, or New Frontier Party, was the successor to the Grand National Party, a right-of-centre party that reflected the traditional conservatism of the former Democratic Republican, Democratic Justice and Democratic Liberal Parties that governed consecutively from the 1960s through much of the 1990s.

devices, these very same institutions, while formally necessary for Park's removal from office, may not have been sufficient to engineer this dramatic change in the political landscape.<sup>52</sup>

Park's successor, President Moon Jae-in, was elected in May 2017. As a progressive politician, former human rights lawyer, member of the '386 generation' and, in his youth, a student activist who had protested against the Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan authoritarian administrations, Moon could be legitimately seen as the political standard bearer of the public forces that had coalesced around the 'candlelight movement'. Unsurprisingly, after becoming president, he was quick to stress the importance of consolidating the participatory democratic process. In that respect, he was the natural heir to his political mentor, the late Roh Moo-hyun, for whom he had worked as a political secretary during the latter's presidency.

However, to his critics, Moon's inclusive approach to politics was not realized in practice during his time in office. Conservative opponents and some academics<sup>53</sup> have claimed that Moon was as uncompromisingly hostile towards his political rivals as previous conservative presidents had been to theirs, and that he intentionally used the institutions of government to attack and delegitimize his opponents.

As evidence for this claim, Moon's critics pointed to his use of moralizing language to demonize those on the right of the political spectrum. Early in his term, the new president talked of the importance of 'eradicating deep-rooted evils' in South Korean society and politics associated with the Park Geun-hye era, and in 2017 he established special task forces to 'purge' conservative figures from key civil service positions. These actions have been cited as proof of a form of left-wing populism and political intolerance that views any conservative political expression or rival agenda as lacking legitimacy.<sup>54</sup>

**To his critics, Moon Jae-in's inclusive approach to politics was not realized in practice during his time in office. Conservative opponents and some academics have claimed that Moon was as uncompromisingly hostile towards his political rivals as previous conservative presidents had been to theirs.**

Most significantly of all, the Moon administration was attacked for its efforts to undermine an independent investigation by the Supreme Prosecutor's office of alleged corruption on the part of the administration's controversial and short-lived justice minister, Cho Kuk. Unconfirmed claims of plagiarism and tax evasion, as well as allegations involving the falsification of the academic credentials of Cho's daughter (the latter allegations involving Cho's wife, who

<sup>52</sup> Hahm and Uk (2018), 'The First Female President in South Korea', p. 658.

<sup>53</sup> Shin (2020), 'South Korea's Democratic Decay'.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., pp. 101–02; Yeo (2020), 'Has South Korean democracy hit a glass ceiling?', p. 545.



was subsequently charged and convicted in 2020), forced Cho to resign from his post barely 35 days after being appointed. The episode severely damaged the Moon administration's reputation for openness and transparency in the eyes of many South Korean voters. It was interpreted by conservatives as proof of the shallowness and hypocrisy of Moon's reform agenda. For progressives, by contrast, the Cho affair was evidence of institutional resistance from conservative politicians and lawyers in the Supreme Prosecutor's office to the government's attempts to rein in the politically motivated investigations of an unaccountable body.

Moon's Blue House was also attacked for embracing 'chauvinistic nationalism' in referencing historical examples of popular resistance to Western or Japanese influence.<sup>55</sup> It was accused of stifling dissent by introducing controversial 'fake news' legislation, allegedly to restrict the legitimate journalism of conservative news media,<sup>56</sup> and of forcing through changes in the electoral system in order to maximize opportunities for smaller, progressive parties in the National Assembly.<sup>57</sup> The government had been accused of campaign irregularities and interference in a 2018 mayoral election in Ulsan,<sup>58</sup> as well as alleged involvement in insider trading-related speculative property deals.<sup>59</sup> The accumulation of these controversies, together with public disaffection over the poor performance of the economy and rapidly rising property prices, sharply dented the government's popularity, especially among young voters. This led to decisive victories for the opposition People Power Party (a successor to the conservative Liberty Korea Party) in the key mayoral elections of Seoul and Pusan in April 2021.<sup>60</sup>

The evidence for the serious allegations around the Moon administration is inconclusive, or at the very least may have been shaped by the country's climate of political partisanship. This climate contributes to a trend towards relative intolerance and uncompromising, scorched-earth turf wars between the left and the right in contemporary South Korea. Indeed, for some observers, conservative attacks on the Moon administration, particularly as these related to the Cho affair, were nothing less than opportunistic efforts by the right to appropriate the language and symbolism of democratic protest to brand the government as elitist and unrepresentative.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, some of the more active partisans on the right – particularly elderly voters (the so-called Taeguki Brigades)<sup>62</sup> who demonstrated against Cho and were most vocal in criticizing the Blue House –

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<sup>55</sup> Shin (2020), 'South Korea's Democratic Decay', p. 109.

<sup>56</sup> Carpenter, J. C. (2021), 'Limits to freedom in public service broadcasting: the case of South Korea', *Medienpolitik International*, 66, pp. 363–65. A key problem in the case of relations between politicians and the media is the power of appointment enjoyed by South Korean presidents over public service broadcasters – an authority which can directly or indirectly contribute to a perception of compromised editorial independence on the part of the news media; Constant, J. (2021), 'The trouble with South Korea's 'fake news' law', *The Diplomat*, 26 August 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/08/the-trouble-with-south-koreas-fake-news-law>.

<sup>57</sup> Shin (2020), 'South Korea's Democratic Decay', pp. 104–05.

<sup>58</sup> Kim, M. (2020), 'Blue House and 2018 Ulsan mayoral election conspiracy', *Korea Herald*, 12 February 2020, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20200211000862>.

<sup>59</sup> Kim, J. (2021), 'South Korea property scandal hurts Moon ahead of key polls', *Nikkei*, 22 March 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/South-Korea-property-scandal-hurts-Moon-ahead-of-key-polls>.

<sup>60</sup> Choe, S.-H. (2021), 'Election Rout Signals a Shift in South Korea's Political Scene', *New York Times*, 7 April 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/07/world/asia/korea-mayor-election-moon-oh-sehoon.html>.

<sup>61</sup> For example, public head-shaving protests in central Seoul by conservative politicians have been intended to evoke the iconography of protest more typically associated with the participatory democratic, anti-elitist movement of the late 1980s, subsequently associated with figures such as Roh Moo-hyun. See Moberand (2021), 'Prosecution reform and the politics of faking democracy in South Korea', p. 271.

<sup>62</sup> These 'fly the flag' nationalist conservatives in their 60s or older advocate uncompromisingly tough policies towards North Korea and retain a nostalgic affection for the authoritarian era of Park Chung-hee.

were numerically less visible and significant than the progressives who had demonstrated against President Park, and who also included supporters of Moon who had backed the beleaguered justice minister. In their more extreme manifestations, some of the conservative counter-protests represented, in the words of Erik Mobernd, a form of ‘acting democratic’<sup>63</sup> rather than a principled political disagreement. Such counter-protests also had the unfortunate effect of causing less well-informed foreign media to assume that the country was neatly split into two irreconcilable political camps, and that progressive politicians such as Moon were as guilty of political malfeasance and corruption as their compromised conservative predecessors.<sup>64</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

Adjudicating between the competing claims of political actors in South Korea is not easy. At the same time, analysts should be wary of seeing the rivalry between today’s left and right as a simple continuation of the rigid dichotomies that characterized progressive–conservative political contestation in earlier eras. What does seem clear is that activists at both ends of the political spectrum have been distrustful of the motivations and behaviour of their opponents, and that political polarization has taken place in an environment in which institutions (including the media, political parties, the National Assembly and the legal system) have been perceived as functioning imperfectly.<sup>65</sup> But polarization does not need to be read as synonymous with populism, whether the latter entails wholesale corruption, the hollowing out of the democratic process, or efforts by political actors to overturn and delegitimize opponents and undermine the very process of political contestation.<sup>66</sup>

The strongest evidence that politics in South Korea continues to function in a manner consistent with hard-won democratic norms is the orderly process surrounding the March 2022 presidential contest and the willingness of the electorate, especially a growing number of self-identifying independent or floating voters, to make their choices on the basis of their self-interests,<sup>67</sup> rather than by retreating into mutually exclusive partisan camps. The two leading candidates in the contest, Lee Jae-myung, representing the governing Democratic Party of Korea, and Yoon Suk-yeol, the People Power Party’s candidate, both embraced policy platforms intended to appeal to the widest constituency of voters (the proposals included wage guarantees, generous welfare provisions, increases in national pensions, reforms to housing policy, and efforts to limit the power of the presidential office and combat elitism in public life).

<sup>63</sup> Mobernd (2021), ‘Prosecution reform and the politics of faking democracy in South Korea’, p. 266.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>65</sup> Kim, E. T. (2019), ‘Under the Influence. Korea’s disinformation problem’, *Columbia Journalism Review*, Summer 2019, [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/under-the-influence.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/under-the-influence.php).

<sup>66</sup> For an interesting discussion of the theoretical relevance of populism in analysing South Korean politics, see Kim, B. H. (2019), ‘Populism, Democracy and South Korea’, *Populism*, 2, pp. 68–72.

<sup>67</sup> Kang, H. (2022), ‘Bring back the bunnies: Lee, Yoon grapple with revolt of stronghold voters’, *Korea Times*, 2 February 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/02/356\\_323830.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/02/356_323830.html).

These bids by the candidates to boost their electoral chances can be criticized for having been unrealistic and economically profligate, rather than for retreating to opposite ends of the political spectrum or trying to frame one side or the other in the political contest as illegitimate. If anything, both left and right were competing for the middle ground of politics, and much of the campaign revolved around the personalities of the candidates, with both camps actively making use of social media to make the two candidates more accessible and attractive to the electorate.

Politicians on both sides of the aisle endorsed some of the signature issues of political identity that used to divide right and left – such as support for the US–South Korea alliance, a commitment to a strong defence policy, and the need to address the challenge of a rising China (themes typically favoured by conservatives); or a focus on acknowledging key events in the country’s democratic transition (such as the Gwangju uprising), boosting South Korea’s autonomy as a diplomatic and economic actor, and finding pragmatic solutions to dealing with North Korea (familiar progressive arguments).

It is true that politics in South Korea can be highly personalized and judgmental. Attacks by both campaigns on the behaviour and character of the wives of the two leading candidates reflected this tendency, which also remains evident in the fiercely contentious nature of political competition. If anything, though, the prevalence of public protest by partisans, whether on the left or the right of politics, is a sign of democratic engagement rather than detachment from political life. Citizen activism is alive and well in South Korea, even if there has been a general decline in membership of civic associations in recent years.<sup>68</sup>

Ultimately, the result of the election – a remarkably small margin between the two leading candidates, with Yoon securing just 48.56 per cent of the vote to Lee’s 47.86 per cent, a gap of just 0.7 percentage points<sup>69</sup> – suggests that neither the left nor the right can claim to speak authoritatively for the Korean ‘people’. Even if the candidates had fought something of a scorched-earth campaign, there is little evidence that the electorate would have been decisively swayed by the sort of zero-sum approach to politics that is characteristic of the populist playbook. Moreover, the high turnout in the contest, with 77 per cent of the electorate participating, suggests that Korean voters take their democratic responsibilities seriously. While it would be foolish to assume that South Korea might not at some point tilt in a more populist direction, the fact that both leading candidates accepted the legitimacy of the final tally and that the winner, Yoon Suk-yeol, stressed the importance of governing in the interests of the country as a whole and respecting the views of parliament (where the progressive opposition still has a majority of seats) suggests there are reasons to be cautiously confident about current political trends.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Cho, Y., Kim, M. and Kim, Y. C. (2019), ‘Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea’, *Asian Survey*, vol. 59, 2, p. 293.

<sup>69</sup> *Korea Times* (2022), ‘Moon calls for national unity after ruling party’s presidential election loss’, 14 March 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/04/356\\_325496.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/04/356_325496.html).

<sup>70</sup> Christian, D. (2022), ‘Conservative Yoon Suk-yeol elected South Korean president’, *Financial Times*, 9 March 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/f9056776-454c-4c58-bff2-b0ca0d98e9b2>; Kang, S. W. (2022), ‘Yoon administration to focus on restoring fairness, democracy’, *Korea Times*, 14 March 2022, [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/04/356\\_325489.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2022/04/356_325489.html).

If one were pressed to identify the shortcomings in modern-day politics in South Korea, it is the persistence of voters' *perception* – and in some cases the reality – that the institutions of government function imperfectly. This is hardly surprising given the relatively recent transition from authoritarian rule to formal democratic government, and the depressingly familiar track record of presidents being indicted on criminal charges after they leave office. Such problems can be addressed constructively via public debate and organizational reforms.

The good news is that the challenges of contemporary South Korean politics are neither intractable nor a sign of irreconcilable differences over identity politics. Nor do they indicate the presence of a 'disease' that fundamentally threatens the health or long-term viability of the body politic. South Korea's democratic evolution continues, and the evidence from developments in public life in recent years suggests that, despite some institutional imperfections, the future for the country's politics overall is bright.

Safeguarding the political system and ensuring its proper functioning will require vigilance and responsibility on the part of politicians, commentators and voters themselves, all of whom will need to respect the legitimacy of rival views to guarantee an open and resilient society in which both representative and participatory democracy can function effectively.

## About the author

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Cover image: Presidential candidates Lee Jae-myung, Yoon Suk-yeol, Ahn Cheol-soo and Sim Sang-jung (right to left) during a presidential debate at the SBS studio in Seoul, 25 February 2022.

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