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THE MASS PUBLIC AND DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN SOUTH KOREA

Exploring the Subjective World of Democratization in Flux

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SOUTH KOREA (Korea hereafter) has achieved a reputation in the contemporary world as one of the four “tiger economies” of East Asia. Like Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, Korea transformed one of the world’s poorest societies into an economic powerhouse within a single generation (Kim and Hong 1997). With a current population of forty-six million, Korea produces a gross domestic product (GDP) larger than that of many Western European states. It is also one of the six new democracies (together with the Czech Republic, Hungary, Mexico, Poland, and the Slovak Republic) admitted in the past decade to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and is only the second Asian country to join the exclusive organization.

In the late 1980s, Korea began its political transformation from military rule to representative democracy. It was the only new democracy that not only transferred power peacefully to an opposition party but also fully transformed an entrenched system of crony capitalism into a competitive and transparent market economy. In the scholarly community, Korea is acknowledged as one of the most vigorous and analytically interesting third-wave democracies (Chu, Diamond, and Shin 2001; Diamond and Kim 2000; Diamond and Shin, 2000; S. Kim 2003). In policy circles, it is increasingly

regarded as a model of market liberalization and political democratization (Bremner and Moon 2002; Haggard 2000; Lemco 2002).

Yet many researchers wonder how much progress Korea has really made in democratizing its authoritarian institutions and transforming the cultural values that for nearly three decades supported military dictatorships. What challenges does the country face in furthering democratization? What are its prospects for consolidating democratic rule? In the literature on the current wave of global democratization, there is a general agreement that nascent democratic rule becomes consolidated when ordinary citizens not only embrace its principles, but also endorse its practices. Therefore, this chapter examines the reactions of ordinary Koreans to democracy both in principle and in action, using data from the East Asia Barometer (EAB) survey. This survey was conducted during February 2003, when Koreans were commemorating the fifteenth anniversary of the democratic Sixth Republic and reflecting on the election of the republic's fourth president, Roh Moo Hyun. (For information about the fieldwork undertaken for the EAB survey, see appendix 1 and Garam Research Institute 2003.)

1. HISTORICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

Between 1987 and 1988, Korea accomplished a peaceful transition from a military dictatorship, led by former general Chun Doo Hwan, to a democratic state that allowed the people to choose their president and other political leaders through free and competitive elections. For nearly three decades prior to the advent of democracy (1961–1987), the military ruled the country as a developmental dictatorship with a rationale of promoting economic development and strengthening national security against the communist North (Moon 1994). Institutionally, the developmental state provided the president with unlimited powers, both executive and legislative in character, to the extent that he was authorized to dissolve the National Assembly and take emergency measures whenever he deemed such actions necessary (Lim 1998, 2002).

By invoking the National Security and Anti-Communist laws, the military dictatorship, led successively by former generals Park Chung Hee and Chun Doo Hwan, suppressed political opposition and curtailed freedoms of expression and association (Moon and Kim 1996). Through security agencies such as the Korean Central Intelligence Agency and the National Security Command, the military regime placed the news media under

strict censorship and kept labor unions and educational institutions under constant surveillance. The regime controlled opposition parties and other nonpolitical civic and business organizations through a variety of tactics including co-optation and intimidation. By suppressing political opposition and deterring individual citizens and civic groups from taking part in the political process, the military dictatorships insulated policymaking from the pressures of social and political groups (Jang 2000). In predemocratic Korea, technocrats and bureaucrats, rather than elected representatives, played the key roles in policymaking.

The constitution of the democratic Sixth Republic, ratified in a national referendum held in October 1987, laid out a new institutional foundation for representative democracy. It provided for direct election of the president with a single, nonrenewable five-year term. The president's powers to rule by emergency decree and dissolve parliament were abolished, while the National Assembly's power to oversee the executive branch was strengthened. The constitution also established the Constitutional Court and created measures to guarantee the independence of the judiciary, broaden civil liberties, protect political parties from being disbanded by arbitrary government action, and mandate the political neutrality of the military.

The second and third presidents of the Sixth Republic—both opposition figures in the era of military rule—implemented reforms to consolidate the spirit of the new constitution. Kim Young Sam (1993–1998) established civilian supremacy over the military and enacted legislation to mandate the use of real names in financial transactions in order to dismantle the structure of political corruption (Kil 2001:58–63). Kim Dae Jung (1998–2003) expanded the social security system to include health insurance, unemployment insurance, pension insurance, and workers' accident compensation insurance (Shin and Lee 2003). With these reforms, the Korean political system moved beyond electoral democracy toward democratic consolidation.

The institutionalization of free and fair elections for both local and central governments expanded the involvement of the mass public. Farmers, factory workers, women, the elderly, the urban poor, businesspeople, and journalists formed new public interest groups as competing forces against the existing government-controlled representational institutions. By the turn of the century, more than six thousand nongovernmental organizations were known to be operating in Korea (Lim 2000; see also S. Kim 2000). As a result, civic associations and interest groups became formidable players in the policy process, which had previously been dominated by bureaucrats and technocrats.

At the time of our survey in 2003, Korean democracy met the criteria for procedural democracy or polyarchy as specified by Dahl (1971) and many other scholars (Przeworski et al. 2000; Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Schmitter and Karl 1991). It was a regime characterized by free and fair elections, universal adult suffrage, multiparty competition, civil liberties, and a free press. In the words of Kim Byung-Kook (2000:52), "Electoral politics has become the only possible game in town for resolving political conflicts." Between 1993 and 2003, Korea received an average score of 2.0 in Freedom House's ratings of political rights and civil liberties, placing it within the ranks of the world's liberal democracies.

Nonetheless, serious problems remain. Institutionally, Korea is a presidential system with multiple minority parties and staggered presidential and parliamentary elections (Kim and Lijphart 1997). But while the president may serve for only a single term of five years, lawmakers can serve multiple terms of four years each. Due to a complex system combining single member legislative districts and proportional representation, in all four parliamentary elections held after the democratic regime change in 1988 up to the time of our survey, more than three parties participated (Jaung 2000). Because these parties have regionally concentrated bases of support in the country, no president's party ever obtained a majority in the legislature. The system often produced immobilizing institutional deadlocks, especially during periods of divided government (Mo 1998, 2001; Park 2002).

To overcome this problem, even democratically elected presidents sometimes resorted to extralegal tactics. They merged political parties and intimidated opposition lawmakers. Their use of prosecutorial power for political purposes undermined the political neutrality of the judicial system. Their frequent use of tax audits for political purposes threatened freedom of expression, as evidenced in the Kim Dae Jung's government investigations of newspapers critical of its policy toward North Korea. Frequent refusal by the executive branch to be accountable to the National Assembly opened the door to what O'Donnell (1994) termed "delegative democracy" and undermined the institutional foundations of representative democracy (Park 1998).

What did the Korean people think of the state of Korean democracy? How was the democratic regime perceived in comparison to the authoritarian system of the past? In the following sections, we examine the Korean people's evaluations of democratic rule as they experienced it on a daily basis for the first fifteen years.

2. CONCEPTIONS OF DEMOCRACY

To explore the Korean people's divergent interpretations of democracy, the EAB survey asked an open-ended question, "What does democracy mean to you?" The responses are displayed in chapter 1, table 1.3.

Virtually all Koreans surveyed (98%) were able to identify at least one constituent or element of democracy. More than one-half (57%) could identify a second element of democracy, and nearly one-fifth (19%) were able to supply a third one.

Nearly 60% associated democracy with freedom and liberty, while 11% defined it in terms of political rights, institutions, and processes. These choices reflect the strength of constitutional values among the Korean public in reaction to decades of political repression under military rule. Another one-third (34%) associated democracy with social justice and equality, and 10% mentioned market economy. The percentages for these two categories were the highest of any country in the survey, perhaps reflecting the history of crony capitalism and labor repressive policies that characterized the generals' regime. Other positive views were mentioned by 26% of respondents. Only half a percent of Korean respondents characterized democracy in negative terms, one of the lowest levels of dissatisfaction in any of the eight countries surveyed. Of the eight East Asian societies surveyed, moreover, Korea registers the highest level of attachment to the rule of law (see chapter 1, table 1.13). Because it associates democracy primarily with freedom and the rule of law, Korea appears to have established a more solid foundation for liberal democracy than other nations in the region.

3. EVALUATING THE TRANSITION

Given their favorable conceptions of democracy, it is interesting to ask to what extent Koreans perceived their current regime as democratic, and how wide a gap they saw between it and the former system of military rule.

3.1. PERCEPTIONS OF REGIME CHANGE

The EAB survey asked respondents to rate their current and past regimes on a 10-point scale, with 1 indicating "complete dictatorship" and 10 indicating "complete democracy." Table 2.1 reports the scores and mean ratings for the two regimes.

Koreans clearly view the current regime as a democracy and the past regime as a dictatorship. More than four out of five Koreans (82%) rated the current regime as democratic by placing it at 6 or above on the scale. The mean rating of 6.5, however, was only the fifth highest among the eight countries surveyed, suggesting that even after a decade of democratic rule by two long-time leaders of the democracy movement, the country remained a partial or limited democracy in the eyes of its people.

The past regime scored 4.4 on the 10-point scale, with nearly three-quarters of the Korean public (71%) rating the past regime as undemocratic by placing it at 5 or below. However, four of the eight EAB surveys rated the old regime as more dictatorial than the Korean survey did, suggesting a nuanced view of the old regime by Koreans today. Indeed, among Koreans who rated the old regime as undemocratic, the less critical were more numerous than the more critical. While 55% rated the military regime as “somewhat dictatorial,” fewer than 17% perceived it as “very dictatorial.”¹

In an analysis not shown here, we found that both those who perceived the past regime to be democratic and those who perceived the current regime to be democratic were significantly more numerous among older people (sixty and older), the less educated (elementary education and less), and residents of rural communities. That is, these three segments of the

TABLE 2.1 PERCEPTIONS OF PAST AND CURRENT REGIMES:
KOREA

(Percent of respondents)		
REGIME TYPES	PAST REGIME	CURRENT REGIME
Very dictatorial (1–2)	16.5	0.5
Somewhat dictatorial (3–5)	54.9	17.8
Somewhat democratic (6–8)	27.5	79.5
Very democratic (9–10)	0.9	2.3
DK/NA	0.2	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0
Mean on a 10-point scale	4.4	6.5

Notes: Regime types are based on the respondent's ranking of the regime on a scale from 1, “complete dictatorship,” to 10, “complete democracy.” Scores of 5 and below are degrees of dictatorship and scores of 6 and above are degrees of democracy.

N = 1500.

DK/NA = Don't know/no answer.

Korean population were the least likely to perceive any fundamental difference between the old and the new regimes. As the members of Korean society most limited in their cognitive capacity to differentiate democratic and nondemocratic regimes, these groups appear the least likely to demand or support further democratic reform. On the other hand, respondents who understood democracy in liberal terms (the first two categories in table 1.3, chapter 1) tended to set more demanding standards for both the old and the new regimes than those with nonliberal views of democracy; they were most likely to see both the past and the current regimes as nondemocratic.

Figure 2.1 displays the distribution of regime change scores. While the majority of Koreans perceived some movement toward greater democracy, the extent of the changes was seen to be limited. About 7% of our respondents perceived no democratic progress, and another 7% reported retrogression toward authoritarianism. Even among those who perceived progress, the majority found it to be limited. A substantial majority of three-fifths (60%) perceived an advance of 3 points or less on the scale, while only 24% perceived substantial improvements of 4 to 9 points.

Based on the ratings of the past and current regimes, we identified six patterns of perceived regime change (see chapter 1, table 1.7). Of these six views, moderate change to democracy was the most popular with 56%. This was followed by continuing democracy (25%), with the other categories all below 10%. Overall, 57% of the Korean people perceived a transition to

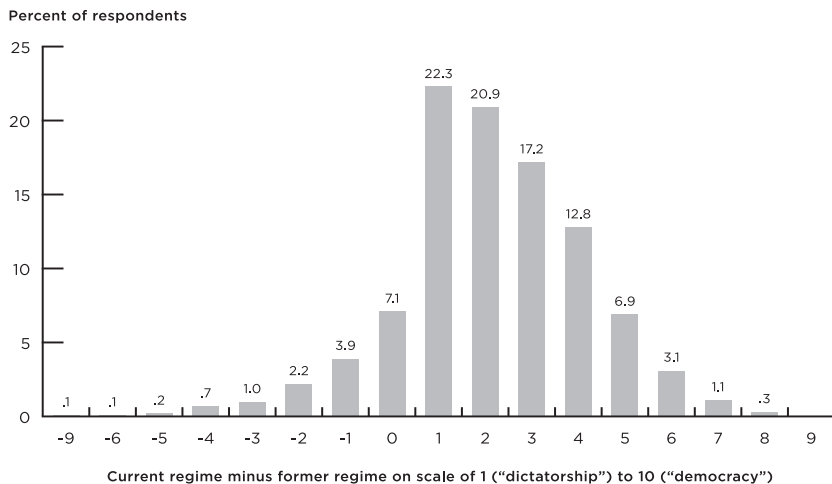


FIGURE 2.1 Perceived Regime Change: Korea

democracy in the aftermath of military rule. Yet even after more than a decade, more than two-fifths (43%) had yet to perceive a regime change. This figure is comparable to what was observed in three of the four other East Asian new democracies, including Mongolia (40%), the Philippines (47%), and Taiwan (36%). Yet it is clearly indicative of a low level of sophistication concerning democratic politics among the Korean people.

3.2. COMPARING PAST AND PRESENT REGIMES

To evaluate the perceived consequences of democratic transition, the EAB survey asked respondents to rate each of nine major government performance domains on a 5-point scale, ranging from “much better than before” (+2) to “much worse than before” (-2).

The mean and PDI scores reported in table 2.2 show that democratic transition has brought about positive consequences in all five areas of democratic performance. Sixty-three percent more respondents saw positive than negative change in the area of freedom of speech, despite government efforts to curb the news media during the last two years of the Kim Dae Jung government (Kirk 2001; Larkin 2001). And nearly half saw improvement in freedom of association. Such public perceptions are consistent with changes in Korea's ratings in the Freedom House index of political rights and civil liberties. On the 7-point index of political freedom (1 being the highest), Korea scored an average of 4.6 during the authoritarian period between 1980 and 1987, but between 1988 and 2002 averaged 2.0, close to the scores for the consolidated democracies in the West. On the index of civil liberties, Korea experienced a similar improvement, moving from 5.4 to 2.4 between the two periods (Freedom House 2003). According to these ratings, democratic rule has indeed transformed Korea into a free country. In the area of judicial independence, however, Koreans were reluctant to rate the current regime as significantly better than the old regime, suggesting that at the time of our survey the public was fed up with the government's frequent use of prosecutorial power against opposition parties.

In the second category of government performance, more Koreans perceived negative change, with economic equality being the most adversely affected. Popular perceptions of changes in the economy appear consistent with objective indicators. According to the Korea National Statistical Office (2003), Korea's annual GDP growth rate averaged 8.7% during the authoritarian Chun Doo Hwan period (1980–1988), but began to decline after the inauguration of the Sixth Republic. By the time of the Kim Dae Jung government

TABLE 2.2 PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE OF CURRENT AND PAST REGIMES: KOREA

	MEAN ^a	SD ^a	NEGATIVE CHANGE ^b	POSITIVE CHANGE ^b	NO CHANGE ^b	PDI ^c	VALID % ^d
Democratic performance							
Freedom of speech	0.74	0.76	6.4	69.7	23.9	63.3	100.0
Freedom of association	0.52	0.76	7.9	53.1	39.0	45.2	99.9
Equal treatment	0.24	0.78	14.8	37.7	47.5	22.9	100.0
Popular influence	0.22	0.82	17.1	37.6	45.3	20.5	100.0
Independent judiciary	0.04	0.78	20.9	26.3	52.8	5.4	99.9
Average	0.35	0.78	13.4	44.9	41.7	31.5	100.0
Policy performance							
Anticorruption	-0.15	0.88	33.4	23.2	43.4	-10.2	100.0
Law and order	-0.17	0.89	36.5	24.7	38.8	-11.7	99.9
Economic development	-0.25	0.97	42.5	24.9	32.6	-17.7	100.0
Economic equality	-0.70	0.86	60.9	8.1	30.9	-52.8	100.0
Average	-0.32	0.90	43.3	20.2	36.4	-23.1	100.0

Notes: N = 1500.

Past regime is defined as pre-1987.

^a Scale ranges from -2 (much worse) to +2 (much better).

^b Percent of valid sample.

^c PDI (percentage difference index) = percent seeing positive change minus percent seeing negative change.

^d Percent of sample giving a valid answer to this question.

(1998–2003) it averaged only 4.6%, a slowdown of nearly 50% from the Chun period. On economic inequality, the Korea National Statistical Office (2001) reported that the country's Gini coefficient, which averaged 0.309 during the Chun period, fell below 0.3 under the first two democratic governments, but rose sharply to an average of 0.317 during the Kim Dae Jung presidency, when the country suffered its worst economic crisis since the Korean War.

More respondents saw negative change in corruption in the aftermath of the regime change. This reflects the exposure of a number of spectacular political corruption cases in the period before we conducted our survey, including one that resulted in the imprisonment of President Kim Dae Jung's two sons and other close associates.

In short, democratization has been a mixed blessing in the eyes of the Korean people, delivering gains in democratic performance but mostly losses in policy performance.

A demographic analysis (not shown here) showed that respondents with lower levels of education and income were in general more supportive of both the democratic performance of the new regime and its policy performance. These segments of the population are apparently less demanding of the new democratic order than are more sophisticated respondents who understand that democracy differs from its alternatives in providing political freedom and pluralistic competition. Thus, Koreans with lower levels of education and income are more likely to express satisfaction with whatever benefits government supplies.

We also found that the perceived impact of regime change on performance was correlated with views of the transition. Those who perceived a democratic regime change were the most positive about its consequences, while those who said they perceived an authoritarian reversal were also the most critical of the new regime's policy performance. On average, the former rated 3.4 domains of public life positively and 2.3 negatively. The latter, however, rated only 2.0 domains positively and 3.5 negatively. Evidently, many Koreans do not judge democratic regime change solely in terms of what happened to their constitution and political institutions. Instead, they judge it in terms of the substantive policy outcomes from which they have personally benefited.

4. APPRAISING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

The effective functioning of democratic institutions depends on the capacity of ordinary people to participate in the political process and on popular

confidence in the country's political leaders and various institutions of state and society. In this section, we examine public evaluations of three aspects of the democratic system—political efficacy, political corruption, and trust in institutions. We will ask how satisfied Korean citizens are with the performance of the system as a whole and the extent to which they would endorse it as the best system for the nation.

4.1. POLITICAL EFFICACY

To estimate Korean citizens' perceived participatory capacity, we selected a pair of items from the EAB survey that tapped into these issues. Respondents were asked about their self-perceived ability to understand the complexities of politics and government and their perceived capacity to participate in politics (see chapter 1, table 1.4).

Roughly two-fifths (39%) of respondents believed they could neither understand nor participate in politics, while only 18% felt capable of both. These numbers confirm earlier findings suggesting a low level of cognitive and behavioral participatory capacity on the part of the Korean public (Shin, Park, and Jang 2002). Yet by comparative Asian standards, Koreans' level of citizen empowerment was relatively high. Korea had one of the lowest percentages of those self-rated as fully incapable and the second-highest percentage after Mongolia of those rating themselves as fully capable.

To assess further the perceived efficacy of popular participation, we asked respondents how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the following statements: "The nation is run by a powerful few and ordinary citizens cannot do much about it," and "People like me don't have any influence over what the government does." On both statements, 41% of our respondents disagreed. Taken together, about one-quarter (24%) disagreed with both statements, while 43% agreed with both. This pattern of prevalent skepticism about the impact of one's own participation on the political system is widespread among the countries included in the EAB project.

4.2. PERCEPTIONS OF CORRUPTION

The EAB survey asked a pair of questions concerning perceived corruption among local and national government officials (see table 2.3). In a region where corruption is a widespread concern, Korea was no exception, with

TABLE 2.3 PERCEPTION OF POLITICAL CORRUPTION AT NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVELS: KOREA

(Percent of respondents)		NATIONAL GOVERNMENT				
LOCAL GOVERNMENT	Hardly anyone is involved	Not a lot of officials are involved	Most officials are corrupt	Almost everyone is corrupt	DK/NA	Total
Hardly anyone is involved	0.1	0.6	0.3	-	-	1.1
Not a lot of officials are involved	0.3	42.8	10.4	1.1	0.1	54.7
Most officials are corrupt	-	8.0	24.4	3.3	-	35.7
Almost everyone is corrupt	0.1	0.8	2.5	5.0	-	8.4
Don't know / No answer	-	0.1	0.1	-	-	0.1
Total	0.5	52.3	37.7	9.5	0.1	100.0

Notes: N = 1500.

Blank cell means no cases.

Percentages above 10 are in boldface.

47% of respondents believing that most or almost all national level officials are corrupt and 44% believing that most or all local level officials are corrupt. Yet the Korean sample was markedly bimodal: while more than half (56%) the respondents expressed concern over corruption, a large minority of 44% stated that “hardly any” or “not a lot” of officials at either the national or local level were involved in corruption. This was, after Thailand and Hong Kong, the highest percentage in the upper left quadrant of the table among all the countries we surveyed.

4.3. INSTITUTIONAL TRUST

The EAB survey asked respondents how much trust they had in eleven state and societal institutions. The results are presented in figure 2.2. Only about 15% of Koreans expressed trust in political parties and the parliament, which constitute two key institutions of democratic politics. Although just under half (44%) of our respondents considered local governments trustworthy, only a quarter (27%) expressed trust in the national government. These results imply that the key political institutions of Korean democracy are not performing properly in the eyes of the public.

By comparison, the Korean public expressed more faith in the administrative organs of the state, especially those that were once the coercive apparatus

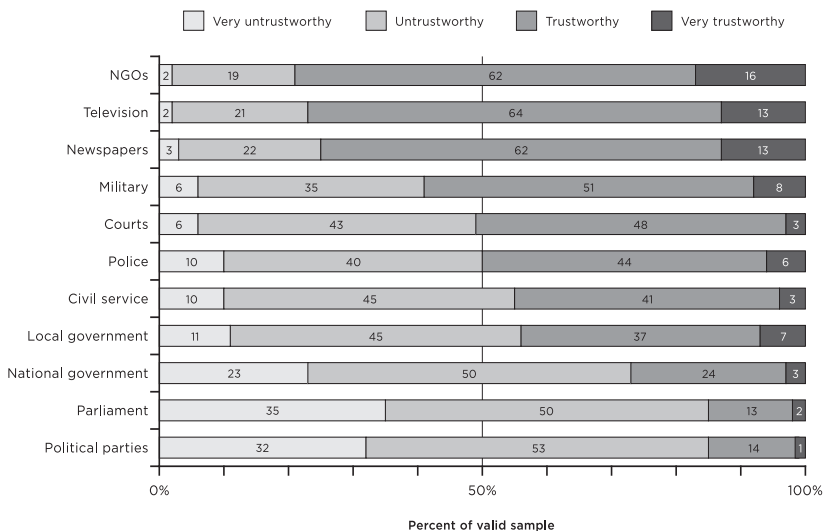


FIGURE 2.2 Trust in Institutions: Korea

of authoritarian rule. More than half (51%) of respondents expressed trust in the judiciary, nearly three-fifths (59%) trusted the military, and 50% trusted the police. Relatively speaking, the technocratic elite fared less well. Only 44% expressed trust in the civil service, despite the fact that it was arguably the most successful pillar of the old developmental authoritarian state.

These findings suggest that significant progress has been made in depoliticizing the security forces and the administrative agencies in the aftermath of the democratic transition. It is notable that the major institutions of the former bureaucratic-authoritarian regime have managed to attain greater levels of public trust, while those of the democratic regime have failed to do so. More notable is the fact that the Korean people were significantly less trusting of state institutions than societal institutions, including the news media and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). All of these societal institutions enjoyed the trust of over three-quarters of the public.

Compared to other third-wave democracies in the survey, however, the overall level of trust is low, suggesting that these institutions have failed to deliver what Korean citizens expected from their new democracy.

4.4. OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF REGIME QUALITY

For a comprehensive assessment of the regime's overall quality, we selected another pair of items from the EAB survey. The first item asked, "On the whole, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the way democracy works in our country?" Contrary to what one may expect given the low levels of institutional trust and perceived political efficacy, more than three-fifths (62%) of the Korean people expressed at least some degree of satisfaction with the current regime at the time of the survey, which was conducted just before the inauguration of a new president in February 2003. However, when asked to evaluate the statement "Whatever its faults may be, our form of government is still the best for us," only 36% agreed. Even among those who expressed satisfaction with the performance of Korean democracy, only a minority (43%) endorsed it as the best for their nation.

Finally, in our assessment of the regime's overall perceived quality, we considered responses to the items above along with the perceived character of the current regime and identified four different views of the current system. Respondents viewed the regime as: (1) an undemocratic system; (2) an ill-performing democracy; (3) a well-performing democracy; and (4) a best-performing democracy.² We found that fewer than one-quarter (23%) of

respondents placed the current system in the most positive category. Thirty-one percent considered the current system a well-performing democracy, 27% an ill-performing democracy, and 19% did not consider the current regime democratic at all. Overall, those who held a positive view of the current system outnumbered those who held a negative view by eight percentage points (54% versus 46%).

Older and less-educated Koreans were significantly more positive in their assessments of the current regime than their younger and college-educated counterparts. Residents of rural communities were also far more positive than those in large metropolitan areas. In all groups, however, at least half of the respondents recognized the current regime as a democracy and expressed at least some degree of satisfaction with the way it performs. This finding suggests that democracy as a system of government has succeeded in appealing to all segments of the Korean population.

5. COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

To citizens with little experience and limited knowledge of democratic politics, both democracy and dictatorship may fail to provide satisfying solutions to the many problems facing society. Confronting this reality, citizens with little democratic experience, more often than not, embrace both democratic and authoritarian propensities concurrently (Rose, Mishler, and Haerpfer 1998; Shin 1999; Shin and Shyu 1997). Growth in their prodemocratic orientations does not necessarily bring about a corresponding decline in their authoritarian attachment. Popular support for democracy in emerging democracies, therefore, depends on a majority that not only accepts democracy, but also rejects its alternatives.

5.1. ATTACHMENT TO DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

A set of five questions allowed us to estimate the level of support for democracy in principle as well as in practice. These questions address democracy's desirability, suitability, preference, efficacy, and priority (see chapter 1, table 1.8). An overwhelming majority (95%) of Korean respondents expressed a desire for democracy by choosing a score of 6 or above on the 10-point scale of how democratic they wanted the current political regime to be, with nearly one-third (31%) selecting either 9 or 10 on the scale.

Levels of attachment to democracy-in-practice were somewhat lower than its desirability. A large majority (84%) considered democracy suitable for Korea by selecting a score of 6 or above on a 10-point scale. However, only a quarter (25%) of respondents selected 9 or 10. Obviously there are many Koreans who, in principle, desire to live in a democracy, but do not believe that it is highly suitable for their country given its current situation.

The EAB survey asked respondents whether or not they believed that "democracy is capable of solving the problems of our society." A substantial majority (72%) replied affirmatively, but the number is lower than for suitability. In other words, even among those Koreans who see democracy as a suitable political system, many question its viability. When responses affirming democratic suitability and efficacy are considered together, less than two-thirds (62%) answered both questions in the affirmative. When we compare this figure with that of democratic desirability (95%), we see that one-third of the Korean electorate remains attached merely to the idea of democracy as an ideal without embracing it as a viable political system.

Close to one-half (49%) of the Korean public agreed with the statement, "Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government." One-third (33%) was willing to entertain an authoritarian alternative while just under one-fifth (17%) expressed no particular regime preference. Fewer than one out of five (19%) said that democracy is somewhat more (15%) or far more (4%) important than economic development. Roughly one-tenth (11%) considered economic and democratic development to be of equal importance. On the other hand, a large majority (70%) replied that economic development is far more (30%) or somewhat more (40%) important. Even among those who said that democracy is preferable to all other kinds of government, a majority (62%) considered it to be less important than economic development.

These findings make clear that in Korea as elsewhere in East Asia, attachment to democracy depends on context. When viewed as a political ideal, almost everyone embraces it. Most of them also consider it a suitable and effective political system. Yet when asked to consider alternatives, only about half endorse democracy as the preferred model of governance, and relatively few prefer it to economic development. The higher the level of abstraction, the greater the level of attachment; the broader the basis of comparison, the lower the level of attachment.

An overall measure of support for democracy can be obtained by constructing a 6-point composite index ranging from 0 to 5, counting the number of positive responses regarding desirability, suitability, efficacy, preference, and priority. On this index, Koreans averaged 3.6, indicating a

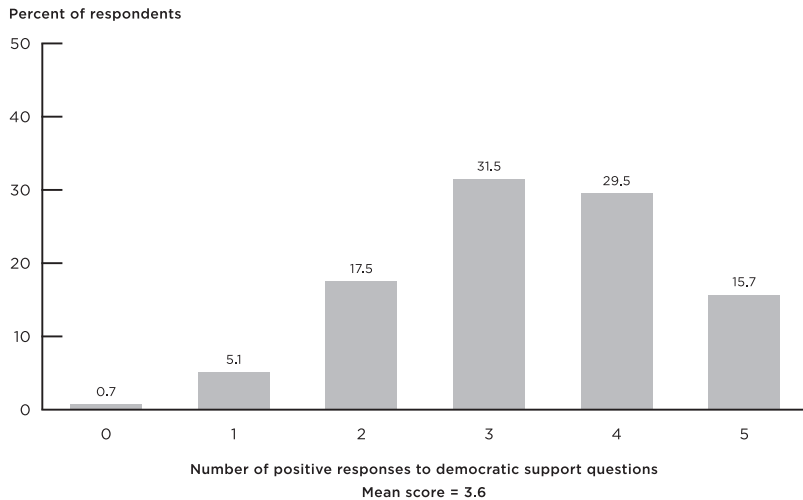


FIGURE 2.3 Democratic Support: Korea

relatively robust level of democratic support in the Asian comparative context. However, figure 2.3 shows that only 16% of Koreans were completely attached to democracy by responding affirmatively to all five questions. Fewer than one-third (30%) received a score of 4. This pattern of less-than-majority support for democracy appears common across the Asian democracies.

5.2. AUTHORITARIAN DETACHMENT

To what extent have Korean citizens detached themselves from the temptations of authoritarian rule? To address this question, the EAB survey asked respondents whether or not they would favor the return to one of four types of authoritarian regime (see chapter 1, table 1.9).

A compelling majority (84%) in Korea—the highest percentage in the regimes surveyed—opposed a return to strongman rule, and an even larger majority (90%), the second highest in the region, rejected the return of military dictatorship. Similar majorities rejected the option of single-party dictatorship (87%), and nearly as many (82%) rejected the option of rule by technocrats. At 65%, rejection of all authoritarian options was the most emphatic of all the regimes surveyed (see figure 2.4). An additional one-fifth (19%) rejected three out of four authoritarian options. After more than a decade of democratic rule, the vast majority of Koreans appeared to have

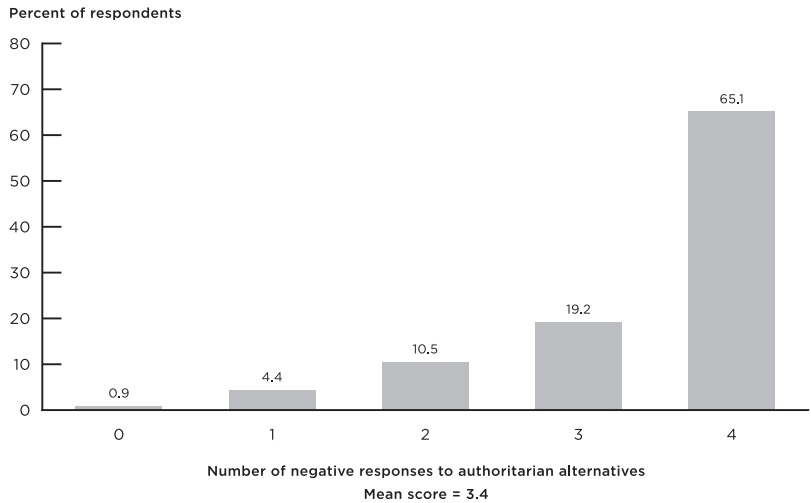


FIGURE 2.4 Authoritarian Detachment: Korea

dissociated themselves substantially from authoritarianism. Yet as shown earlier, support for democracy is not very deep. Full rejection of authoritarianism is apparently to some extent independent of the full embrace of its alternative, democracy. This suggests that at the level of culture, democratization is a process with different dimensions or stages that do not necessarily change in full synchronization.

5.3. OVERALL COMMITMENT TO DEMOCRACY

As argued in chapter 1, the consolidation of democratic rule requires commitment to democracy among a majority of the citizenry, combining attachment to democracy with detachment from authoritarianism (Alexander 2002; Diamond 1999; Inglehart 2000; Linz and Stepan 1996a). Otherwise, the cultural norms of the previous authoritarian regime may cohabit with the institutions and procedures of democratic rule (O'Donnell 1996; Shin and Shyu 1997). If this happens, citizens embrace democratic and authoritarian propensities concurrently, “not as hypothetical alternatives but as lived experiences” (McDonough, Barnes, and Lopez Pina 1994:350; see also Rose and Mishler 1994).

Figure 2.5 identifies seven patterns of regime orientation, taking into account both levels of democratic attachment and authoritarian detachment as

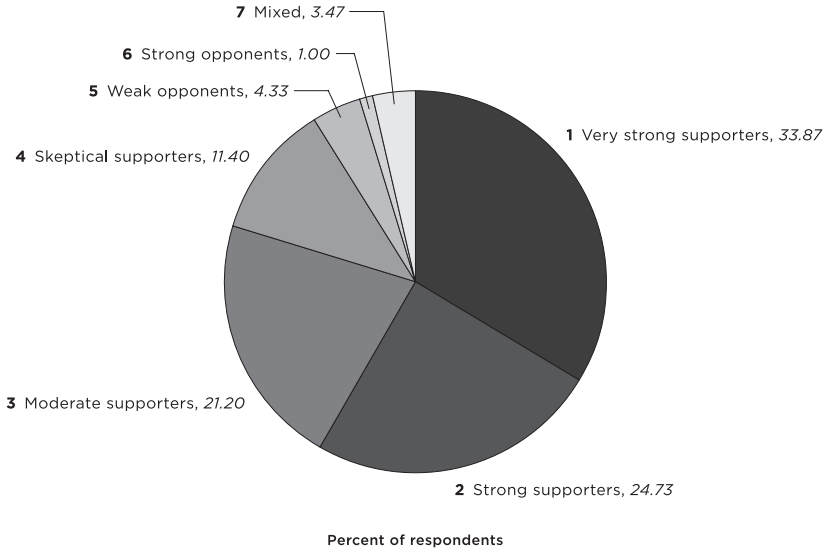


FIGURE 2.5 Patterns of Commitment to Democracy: Korea

defined in the notes to table 1.11, chapter 1. Among the political systems in the EAB survey, Korea has the highest proportion of supporters and the lowest proportions of opponents and persons with mixed regime orientations. Nearly two-thirds of the Korean people were supporters of democracy, outnumbering opponents by over eighteen to one (91% to 5%). Although 5% of the public had yet to accept democracy as the “only game in town,” compared to their neighbors, Korean citizens were the most democratically committed in East Asia.

6. EXPECTATIONS OF KOREAN DEMOCRACY

What changes do the Korean people anticipate in their political order? Are they optimistic about its future? In the EAB survey, respondents were asked to indicate their evaluations of the current and future standings of the political system on a 10-point scale, with 10 representing “complete democracy.” The results for Korea are presented in table 2.4. According to the mean ratings reported in the table, Korean citizens anticipated significant democratic improvements in their political system. On the 10-point scale, they expected the system to progress toward an advanced democracy by 1.2 points from 6.5 to 7.7 in the next five years. More than

TABLE 2.4 CURRENT AND EXPECTED FUTURE REGIME TYPE: KOREA

(Percent of respondents)

RATING	CURRENT REGIME	FUTURE REGIME	CHANGE ^a
Very dictatorial (1–2)	0.5	0.1	-0.4
Somewhat dictatorial (3–5)	17.8	4.9	-12.9
Somewhat democratic (6–8)	79.5	68.0	-11.5
Very democratic (9–10)	2.3	26.7	24.5
DK/NA	0.0	0.3	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	
Mean on a 10-point scale	6.5	7.7	1.2

Notes: N = 1500.

Scale runs from 1, “complete dictatorship,” to 10, “complete democracy.”

Future regime is five years from time of survey.

DK/NA = Don't know/no answer.

^a Change in percent of respondents rating the regime at the given level when the object of evaluation shifts from the current to the future regime.

one-quarter (27%) believed that in five years they would live in an advanced democracy, a nearly twelve-fold increase from the 2% who placed the present regime in the same category. Even among those respondents who considered the current regime to be undemocratic, most expected progress toward greater democracy. While 18% considered the present regime to be very or somewhat dictatorial, only 5% expected the system to remain so in five years. Nearly every Korean (95%) expected to live in a democracy soon (as compared to 82% who believe they live in a democracy now). Such optimism about increasing democracy may fuel demands for continued democratization and promote Korea's consolidation as a new democracy.

We classified our respondents' current and future regime ratings into seven patterns of expected regime change (see chapter 1, table 1.12). The majority of Koreans (54%) expected the persistence of a struggling democracy. This is followed by those who expected continuing democratic development from a limited to an advanced democracy (23%). Among those who considered the current regime to be undemocratic, the majority anticipated at least some degree of democratic progress. About 14%

anticipated the transition to a limited democracy, while only 3% expected the persistence of authoritarian rule. A tiny minority of 2% anticipated authoritarian retrogression.

7. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Koreans' rejection of authoritarianism is unambiguous, and they are optimistic that the process of democratization will continue in the future. Popular sovereignty is practiced at all levels of government through regularly scheduled free and fair elections. Normative support for democracy as an ideal political system has become nearly universal, while support for democracy-in-action, which involves the endorsement of democracy as a suitable and effective system, is pervasive through every segment of the population.

Korea is thus one of the most firmly consolidated of the new democracies in our survey. Yet Korea remains at some distance from full democratic consolidation both institutionally and culturally. Institutionally, the operations of government are often stymied by a system that blends semipresidentialism with multipartyism, using staggered presidential and parliamentary elections. This system often produces divided governments and immobilizing institutional deadlocks, which help to sustain low levels of public trust in political institutions. Meanwhile, long-standing problems of corruption and economic inequality, among others, remain to be tackled. Culturally, only a small minority of Koreans unconditionally embrace democracy as the best form of government. Support for democracy is not unconditional, and large majorities in Korea as elsewhere in Asia consider it less important than economic development (see also Shin 2003b; Shin et al. 2003). Considering Korea's vulnerable economic and geostrategic position in the world, its leaders will need both wisdom and luck to sustain the kind of policy performance that can fortify the public's commitment to the new democratic system.

NOTES

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1. The 28% who rated the old regime as a democracy rather than a non-democracy in our 2003 survey was higher than in previous Korean Democracy Barometer surveys—19% in 1996, 19% in 1997, 18% in 1998, 13% in 1999, and 14% in 2001 (Shin 2003a). Our data do not enable us to explain why this proportion has increased.
2. These four types of regime quality are identified in three successive steps. In the first step, respondents were divided into two groups according to their perception of the current regime. Those who perceived it as a non-democracy were grouped into category 1. In the second step, we divided those who perceived it as a democracy into two subgroups depending on whether or not they were satisfied with its performance. Those who were not satisfied became category 2. In the third step, we subdivided into two types those who were satisfied with the performance of the current regime as a democracy on the basis of their relative assessment of its quality. Those who expressed agreement with the statement that “Whatever its faults may be, our form of government is still the best for us” formed category 4. Those who did not agree with this statement were placed into category 3.