

Presidential Elections and the Rooting of Democracy

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Since 1987 presidential elections have been the defining political moments in Korea. Although local elections may be more illustrative of the democratic process, for it is that level at which citizens are in intimate contact with their government and gauge its effectiveness, presidential elections command more attention because of the nature of Korean political culture. The Korean president has been half king, half chief executive. The cabinet has been his plaything, changeable at his whim; the legislature to date at most a modest thorn in his side. His phalanx of staff in the Blue House (the presidential residence) rarely questions his decisions. In his society he is far more powerful than the president of the United States is in his. There is no vice president in Korea.

Since the formation of the First Republic in 1948, Korea has regularly held presidential elections, despite a student revolution in 1960 and two military coups in 1961 and 1979. Sometimes these elections were travesties of the democratic electoral process — procedural exercises rigged to produce administratively dictated results. In 1963 they were virtually forced on a regime that did not want to hold them by the United States for international public relations purposes. South Korea is now ruled under what is called the Sixth Republic, reflecting six major changes in the constitution. These alterations have fundamentally affected how elections for the presidency are held, who elects the president and for how long, and what the powers of that office and more generally the bureaucracy, which is controlled by the president, are.

Presidential elections in Korea until 1987 were virtually meaningless, since the winner was clearly foreshadowed. They provided the window dressing for any regime that needed good international public relations, and they all did as dictatorial Korea strove to be known as part of the "free world." But in another, less obvious, sense, they were profoundly important. Although they had been mandated by the external image that Korea, echoed by the United States, was trying to portray to the outside world as a democratic state,

they were cumulatively creating a climate and acceptance of procedures and developing what became a clearly felt need for holding such events and dispelling the cynicism that had become attached to the process. Presidential elections could not be ignored by even the most dictatorial regime. Not holding elections could be justified only by a national emergency of profound consequences, such as another peninsular war. Thus, in a sense, political substance followed political form.

In a number of instances, Korea has moved, inadvertently and sometimes against the best laid plans of the leadership, in more democratic directions from which there is no return to older, more autocratic, practices. The year 1987 was pivotal for Korea: The nature of the political process and the future of domestic politics changed. But change was forced on a government reluctant to give up control over both the presidential nomination process, which was through a heavily controlled and carefully selected number of delegates, and the indirect election of the chief executive through a similarly managed group.

Responding to an incipient civil rebellion welling in the streets of Seoul and to the admonitions by the United States to avoid any military action, such as martial law or garrison decree, the dictatorial government of President Chun Doo Hwan agreed to a set of liberalizations of the political process as articulated on June 29 by his designated successor, Roh Tae Woo. These included the direct election of the president by the whole electorate, a freer press, and other rights written into the revised constitution. Although presented as a magnanimous gesture by the government, these liberalizations were in fact virtually forced on the government by public opinion. What started as a student campaign had become a widespread movement involving the middle class. It paralleled the end of the Marcos regime in the Philippines in 1986, when the Makati business community joined the anti-Marcos camp.

Although political campaign financing had been murky and enormous funds illegally transferred, largely in cash, Roh Tae Woo and the government party won that election, but not because it was fixed. Rather, the leading opposition candidates, each with a concept of personalized power, could not agree to form a united front and thus split the opposition vote allowing Roh to win on a plurality.

The 1992 election, the financing of which has not yet been explained and which brought Kim Young Sam to power, was a fair election that saw the first return to true civilian control in over 30 years; it was not a military regime in mufti. Kim ran on the government

party ticket after having been in opposition all of his political life. Although many regarded this act as inappropriate, President Kim had the highest popularity rating of any president in Korean history shortly after his inauguration. The general population was overjoyed by the political progress that had been made, and the election was greeted with great acclaim.

Two other unplanned events have taken place since that have inadvertently moved the political process forward. The first was the unanticipated effects of holding local elections for governors, mayors, and county chiefs, as well as councils at each administrative level, for the first time since 1960. Although touted as "local autonomy," and mandated by the revised and liberalized constitution of 1987, this was essentially a misnomer, because real power still rested at the center. For every elected chief executive, there was an appointed deputy; the judicial, police, and other powers emanated from the Ministry of Home Affairs or other central authorities, and fiscal autonomy was severely limited. Yet this very fact of holding local elections will likely cause a welcome and important change in the political process. Not only will local authorities have to account to their constituents, as expected, but political parties at the center will no longer be able to mobilize the type of mass support that once was standard in such elections nor, and even more important for the future, will they retain the capacity to pick candidates for local elections at the virtual whim of the chair, for many have local constituencies that are no longer dependent on the center. This unanticipated result will strengthen democratic procedures within political parties, which are still among the weakest links in the political process.

The most recent unanticipated action that will affect the democratic process was the failure of President Kim Young Sam, whose administration had become discredited through endemic charges of corruption, to select in July 1997 his nominee as the government party's presidential candidate. For the first time in Korean history there was an open political convention by the government's party. This event may have both immediate and long-term implications, particularly on those in office when a new government is elected (a designated successor might help protect an incumbent). From now on it will be extremely difficult to have the nominating convention dictated by the Blue House, although the incumbent's influence will still be important. This diffusion of power bodes well for a more democratic future.

Thus, progress at the local level, the cornerstone of the democratic process, and in the parties has been quite evident and important in recent Korean history.

The Rooting of Democracy

How deeply rooted, then, are these democratic processes and procedures that have become a part of the Korean political scene, and what has prompted their development? What of the political culture?

Much of the established wisdom, especially in the United States, is that pluralistic economic systems of private enterprise lead to pluralistic political systems. Sometimes this process is, incorrectly or simplistically, attributed to Korea. There seems little doubt that over the long term private sector economic growth does put pressures on political systems to become more open, transparent, and responsive. During much of the era of the republics, the government, through complete and subsequently major control of the institutionalized credit systems and manipulation of corporate leadership, was able to impose its will on the economy and the large *chaebol*, or conglomerates, which indeed it helped to create to serve state purposes. If the export drive is calculated from the coup of 1961, then it took 26 years for political liberalization. (In Taiwan, it took even longer — from 1949 to 1992.) rather than private sector causes, there were other complex factors at play in the rooting of democracy, although in Korea the private sector was not irrelevant and will be expected to play **a far more active role** in politics.

One important element was urbanization, not just the increased incomes and sophistication of an electorate, but also the very fact of urbanization itself. In 1961, when Park Chung Hee launched his coup, Korea was only 25 percent urban. With complete control over institutional credit, the ability to subsidize rice production and control producer prices through government purchases, and close surveillance of the rural population, the state had a firm grip over the hinterland. As a result virtually no opposition politicians from rural constituencies were elected to the National Assembly, which was weighted toward the rural sector in any case. By the late 1980s the population had become 75 percent urban. The election of opposition political candidates from major metropolitan areas, even their political domination of some of these urban areas, was long-standing. With urbanization went loss of government control over the political process.

The loss of control was only partly a result of a lack of dependence on government-controlled credit. It was prompted by a

variety of important factors, such as the rise in levels of urban education, the growth and availability of foreign and domestic information, and the increase in incomes along with the development of a real middle class that was calculated in the late 1980s at about 55 percent. Changes in other countries also were not lost on Korea; the Philippines' "people power revolution" of 1986 was, if not a model, an inspiration. Park Chung Hee had had offensive news in the foreign press inked out by hand and suppressed local news reporting on foreign revolutions, but new and widespread technology made this impossible and counterproductive. Previous regimes had assiduously attempted to regulate and control the development of civil society through both positive incentives and intimidation. Park Chung Hee forced the establishment of umbrella professional organizations into which he placed compliant leadership. Private organizations could be shut down under various types of sweeping legislation or simply by fiat, while organizations that served the state's interests could be co-opted through financial support. The Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) was ubiquitous. The assassination of Park in 1979 (ironically by the head of the KCIA) provided a narrow window for liberalization that was closed by the Chun Doo Hwan coup of December 12, 1979. But civil society — autonomous nongovernmental, voluntary, advocacy, and professional associations — was expanding. By the time of the official liberalization in 1987, these groups were beginning to exercise considerable independence and were taking positions at variance with government policies. The ability of the state to control organizational views was severely constrained by the perceived internal lack of political legitimacy of the Chung Doo Hwan regime.

Pluralism has since flourished. There are probably many thousands of nongovernmental organizations throughout the country (about 3,000 of the larger groups are listed in a directory of Korean nongovernmental organizations). Such organizations range from those operating at local levels to national organizations advocating public policies of various kinds — from the more rigorous enforcement of legislation on the environment, consumer protection, or women's rights to calls for fundamental shifts in the economy or political processes. It is evident that, short of conflict on the peninsula, pluralism and civil society are now deeply rooted in Korea.

So are other institutions of the democratic process. There is a universal electorate that exercises its votes in high percentages that would be most welcome in the United States. There is a vibrant National Assembly, which, despite its limited power in practice owing

to virtually sacrosanct major budgetary allocations such as defense, is a critical sounding board for accountability in the bureaucracy and in the political process. The judiciary, although subject to government pressures and influence through its recruitment and financing, is freer than ever and even occasionally finds against the state, while the Constitutional Court, a product of liberalization, has occasionally declared government-sponsored legislation unconstitutional. The press is more self-censored and less directly controlled than it has ever been. Political parties multiply, coalesce, and transform themselves with astonishing speed and regularity.

One critical element in this transformation has been the retreat of the military to the barracks. Without incident, they have relinquished power, and the threat of a coup or other military action short of war is highly unlikely. In the process toward democratization, and in comparison with worldwide trends showing military rulers to be most reluctant to retire from power, this must be considered a major achievement of Korean society.

Thus, Korea is today a pluralistic, procedural democracy. All the institutions that make for democratic governance are in place, and many function reasonably well. But the demise of authoritarianism in Korea should not be equated with effective democracy; their relationship is more nuanced. Korea, to put it differently, is on the path of democratization, and although the democratic process may be expected to grow and mature (not without trauma), there are still important gaps in the system that prevent Korea from being called an unqualified democratic society.

Issues of Democratic Deepening

The myriad definitions of democracy vary depending on cultural factors and political persuasion. Democracy has become a hyphenated term, modified by various regimes to suit their particular prejudices and political purposes. The ultimate test of democracy, if not its definition, is whether there is a peaceful change of administration among or between political parties (not between factions of the same party) through the electoral process. This has occurred in Asia only occasionally and only in a few countries: the Philippines, India, Sri Lanka (not without setbacks and problems in each), and most recently Japan.

Korea has yet to experience this change but may do so at this election. This very possibility is a testament to Korean political progress. If it occurs, it will be a watershed in Korean political history.

This potential change of administration is remarkable for two reasons: First, the military is in no position to act (one of the potential winners, Kim Dae Jung, was not long ago anathema to it and had been jailed on several occasions and sentenced to death); and second, the Korean political party lineup was redesigned in January 1990 specifically to prevent a different administration from coming to power. Using the Japanese model of the Liberal Democratic Party, whose power at that time seemed permanent but has since proved ephemeral, the government's Democratic Republican Party brought into it two leading political contenders, Kim Young Sam and Kim Jong Pil, together with many of their followers, with the idea that following the Roh Tae Woo presidency (1988-92) a parliamentary system would be inaugurated, with a ceremonial president (Korean presidents serve only one term of five years) and a powerful prime minister who would not be subject to term limitations. Thus political leadership would be rotated among the various factions of the government's party for an indefinite period. The plan did not succeed, as Kim Young Sam is said to have reneged on his consent to it.

The issues of the deepening of democracy relate most basically, however, to the political culture. Two factors are paramount and fundamental. The first is the conception of the role of power and authority; the second is the concept of the relation of the state to civil society and to the individual, and thus the social space between the institutions of governance and the individual and collective citizenry.

Personalization of Power

The processes of political and economic development do not necessarily proceed symmetrically. Economic growth may occur while political institutions stagnate, at least for a considerable period. So, too, the functions of institutions may become modernized, but their administration and the attitudes toward the distribution of power and authority may be very traditional. A Korean scholar once said that Koreans operate with Western hardware and Confucian software. He meant that although industrial empires have been built on high technology and appear most modern, the attitudes toward the locus, distribution, extent, and use of power are very traditional.

This is, of course, not unique to Korea; many societies retain traditional aspects of authority, and no society is homogeneous in its concepts of power. Yet foreign observers are sometimes unconsciously misled by the image of a modern, vibrant Korea without realizing that behind that facade are some deeply ingrained traditional values, not

only of a societal nature, but also of the operation of power. Obviously, no society is static, and no one would ever accuse Korea of being so. Attitudes are in transition, which creates yet another set of tensions, and no society is completely traditional or modern — the issue is one of emphasis and where a particular culture is placed along a shifting spectrum of attitudes toward power.

Power in Korea is conceived of as finite, there being only a limited supply. To share it is to diminish one's own stock. In a "modern" administrative system, power is conceived of as infinite — thus sharing may prompt the accrual of even greater amounts of power to the leadership. But the traditional view is that to share is to reduce not only one's power but also one's prestige in a society in which power is both admired and feared. It is thus a zero-sum game. This leads to a personalization of power, and with such personalization, factionalism, which was the bane of traditional Korean court politics and is strongly present in contemporary Korea.

Personalization of power extends from the highest of institutions down through the family. So a Korean president is accused of being "imperial." The central government is highly reluctant to share authority with provincial or other lower units of governance, thus the reticence to allow, and the tentative nature of, local autonomy. The heads of *chaebol* retain authority and personalize decision making to a degree remarkable in companies that have worldwide reputations and interests as well as the most advanced technologies. The ultimate authority figure in descending order from the state is the father of the family. But the lowest becomes the highest — the analogy of the father is used to personalize the role of the leader (Kim II Sung in North Korea as the father) or the government as a whole. The people are the children who will do what their benevolent father tells them is best for them. The concept has been explicit for over a thousand years in Korean literature.

Korea is also a strongly hierarchical society, and this layered system of respect and privilege is manifest from the language, where no one is equal, to the operation of politics. Hierarchy reinforces the concept of personalized power. Hierarchy was also fostered by the Japanese colonial administration which centralized authority in the most efficient system Korea had seen until that time, with the Japanese at the acme of power. Part of that administrative system and the laws associated with it are still in effect. Military rule introduced another, reinforcing element of hierarchy. Korean state decision making and authority extended effectively far into the society (more extensively,

said some observers, than in the Soviet Union), so that developmental policies were implemented with extraordinary zeal and effectiveness, even when misguided.

The personalization of authority is related to responsibility for error as well as for progress. Because the king ruled on the basis of moral example corresponding to the moral order of the universe, he was responsible personally for the fertility of the land and the loyalty and good behavior of his subjects. Thus, if things go wrong some leader must take the blame. If there is a railway accident, the minister of transportation must resign, even if he had nothing to do with the incident or took office a few days before. Therefore as political efficacy is personalized, so is political inability.

Nowhere is this problem of personalization of power more apparent than in the political party process, which is one of the weakest segments of the democratization process. Political parties in Korea have been circumscribed — the left wing is not part of the spectrum, having been declared illegal. Aside from this particularity of Korean politics, political parties stand for virtually no programs. Since independence in 1948 there have been over 100 parties in Korea. Their names are all fine-sounding, involving such time-honored terms as "democratic," "republican," "liberal," and so forth, but the party's title rarely relates to its ideological reality.

Political parties in Korea are not political parties in the Western European or American tradition. They are in fact political entourages that are formed and reformed with only one of two objectives — to retain power or to achieve it. Party names change at the whim of the leader or for perceived cleansing or other public relations reasons in accordance with a kind of obscure political geomancy. Parties have no continuity in advocacy. They do not train future leaders, for if an underling begins to assume popularity he is expelled or more likely will seek to form and head a new party.

Only in 1987, when Roh Tae Woo took over the party from Chun Doo Hwan, was the new-party rule broken. One of Ron's first tasks was to purge the party of Chun's followers and install his own core group in authoritative positions. Many of Chun's followers splintered off, joining the Kim Jong Pil group a little later. When Kim Young Sam joined the party in 1990, he also began reforming it in his own image. Political alliances among leaders are ephemeral and break down under the strain of divergent authority in tension with personalized power.

The Korean political representational system reinforces the autocratic authority of the party leader in a manner that is probably inadvertent. Korea's National Assembly is composed not only of elected representatives of various parties but also a number of other appointed representatives in proportion to the percentage of votes that a party received in the elections. This system has been charged as cultivating corruption, as the seats might be bought for large payments to the party — the safer the seat, the higher the payment. In reality, the more important issue may be one of power; the choice of those who occupy proportional seats rests with the party leadership, which increases the authoritarian tendencies of the party head, as those who are chosen as proportional candidates have no individual political bases.

That no member of the party votes against its wishes is further evidence that party is the rigid preserve of the leadership. Additionally, there are no votes of conscience on nonparty issues, as in the United Kingdom, or splitting of votes as in the U.S. Congress. In fact, public records are not kept of how individual legislators vote — it is assumed that they vote with the party at all times.

Legislators change parties depending on opportunities and circumstances. It is not that one might feel more ideologically or intellectually comfortable with a certain group, but rather that the group may present possibilities for advancement. When the government lost a majority by a small margin in the National Assembly, it was able to recruit others to its ranks by various means, and thus keep a narrow majority. These factors have produced cynicism about the National Assembly. Legislators in Korea in general seem to have little public respect, although constituents of a particular legislator may feel quite differently about that individual. The public assumes that they are corrupt, and this may be one reason that, of all public servants, they have no pensions.

Democracies function under what in the West is called the rule of law. That simple phrase is based on complex historical precedents that allowed its evolution over centuries, and on the institutionalization of law. Personalization of power implies rule by some who are either above or beyond the legal system — those who play by individual, self-imposed rules.

A rule of law system where even the head of state is not above the law is evolving, but the process is slow. It is, of course, predicated on the independence of the judiciary, which has been lacking in Korea. This is illustrated by the jailing of two former presidents on corruption

(and one on mutiny) charges. The courts at first held that they could not try a leader of a successful mutiny, and then some months later, under political pressure, changed their view.

If such personalization of power exists in the realm of the state and its institutions, it would be highly unlikely that it did not also exist in other fields as well. Privately owned universities often give their presidents extraordinary authority on his or her personal whim. *Chaebol* operate in the same manner. Nongovernmental organizational and civil society leadership may also illustrate the same tendencies. The culture of power strongly affects how all, not just government, institutions operate.

Social Distance and Democratic and Human Rights

Discussion of the intervention of the state into the economies of East Asian societies has now become a commonplace, even trite, commentary on their remarkable development. Economists and others have noted this extensive intrusion and considered it with varying degrees of equanimity, although there is no denying that the results have had remarkable impact on the world scene. Even if, as some scholars maintain, Korea has gone from a "developmental state" characterized by heavy-handed government interference, regulation, and control of the economy to a "postdevelopmental state," where this control is largely unexercised, the model is evident and still alive.

Yet there seems to be a myopia among foreign observers on East Asia, and perhaps especially on Korea, that separates into intellectually watertight compartments economic from other types of intervention. Economic intervention is accepted as a fact, whatever efficacy one wishes to assign to it. Economic intervention, however, is far more complex, and interventions in general far more intrusive than many foreign observers imagine. In Korean society the space, or social distance, between the government and the individual is much more narrow than in many other societies. This means both that the proclivity of the state to intervene in the lives of its citizens is far greater than in many other cultures and these interventions are far more readily accepted by the population. The distance is widening both for business and for general society as government is pushed by business, reinforced by the international economic order, to stand aside and let untrammelled economic development take place.

Here again the Confucian analogy of the role of the state as leader comes into play. The state intervenes in a beneficent manner to assist the people, as a father does with his children. As one instructs

and controls what a young, impressionable child may read, watch, see, or say, and who his or her associates may be, the state provides guidance on all possible occasions. Even today, parental intervention into the marriage process is pronounced and generally accepted (although the children have veto power over parental suggestions and the vetting of possible mates). Government believes it knows best; for example, although in English-language publications Koreans use the term "agricultural extension" (as in the extension of services to the farmer), the literal translation is the more interventionist "agricultural guidance." Furthermore, the government, through selective and punitive tax audits and other means, has the capacity to make deviance from accepted norms expensive.

State intrusion has extended into virtually every part of private life. Sumptuary laws, which have existed in some form for half a millennium, even today mandate, for example, how much might be spent on a wedding, or the extent to which one might provide flowers for various occasions. These laws or edicts are largely ignored, but their existence and the lack of public protest to them (in contrast to ignoring them) indicate that state authority over everyday life is not ended. When foreigners complain about anti-luxury campaigns directed against foreign goods, they may not be aware of a long tradition of this type of popular and governmental-inspired measure.

Korea adheres officially to the concept that human rights are universal and does not formally accept as public policy that there may be "Asian values," as do some other regimes, many of which use the concept to justify varying degrees of restriction or repression. Yet the individualism on which universal rights are predicated is far less pronounced in Korea than in many other societies. Nevertheless, the traditional communalism is in the process of change. Families in the past have been punished for the actions of their members (this is still true in North Korea), and the latest version of the Korean constitution, reflecting the prevalence of the problem, specifically prohibits this.

Only recently, and then under pressure from international organizations such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the International Labor Organization, have the rights of labor, which have been the most curtailed of any social group, been in part restored. Labor had legally been excluded from the political process until 1997. Unions could not form parties, support candidates, or provide funds for campaigns. This has been modified and one labor leader has determined (at this writing) to run for the presidency under some civil society auspices. Whether there will

develop a party with the loyalties of labor, and how such a party might relate to regional loyalties, are questions without immediate answers.

It is, of course, in the interests of any Korean government to portray itself as democratic and to downplay the intrusions on what may be regarded as rights in other states or justify them on the basis of culture. Korea did this before the UN Social and Economic Council in justifying the legislation against teachers forming labor unions, on the basis that Korea is a Confucian society that honors learning and teachers, and unions would undercut their authority and respect. Such a portrayal is more important to South Korea than to many other societies because it has been in constant competition with North Korea, and, although it now may have won the war, it has not forgotten the battle.

The narrow gulf between state and society effectively limits the rights that are associated with democracy. Although there is more freedom in Korea today than ever before, and the process of expanding those freedoms is likely to continue, the state sets limits that are far more stringent than in many societies that are also called democracies.

Media

The media exemplify the narrowness of the state-society gap. Knowledge is power, and past tendencies have been for the state to control the media. At the worst of times, KCIA operatives sat in the editorial offices of newspapers, dictating what might be written. Later, directives came from the government of what might or might not be printed and what was absolutely forbidden.

Today that situation has changed. But the personal connections of the government officials who deal with the media are so important and their roles so senior that their informal admonitions are taken seriously. Because of the strongly hierarchical nature of society that limits the leadership's access to critical information, along with the heritage of the media as part of the literati, the press in Korea needs to perform the role of a modernized imperial censorate, which had access to the king and told him what was wrong with his policies and activities. They are, in effect, the court of last resort.

Although the media may seem to be extremely critical of an administration, excessive negative coverage more likely represents a feeding frenzy after administrative anomalies have already been brought to light. There is little investigative reporting. Through advertising, which now accounts for about 90 percent of press revenue,

as well as some important press ownership, the *chaebol* play an inordinately large role in how the press responds to political issues.

Intelligence and Ideology

The methods and institutions for intelligence intrusions are still in place, although their scope is more limited and they seem quiescent. The Agency for National Security Planning (formerly the KCIA, but renamed after Park's assassination) still has an extensive network that is pervasive, but invisible to the general citizenry. But should the bounds of acceptable practice be broken, it may become active indeed. In fact its purview was strengthened by legislation in 1997 demanded by the president in light of the severe student demonstrations of August 1996.

Although the subject is in dispute among Korean scholars, there seems to have existed in Korea, at least since the fourteenth century, a strong tendency for intellectual orthodoxy. The official imprimatur of Confucianism was placed on society through both court actions and decrees as well as through an official examination system that ratified continuation in (but not entry into) an elite class based on intellectual excellence within prescribed sociocultural limits. The rigidity of the system is illustrated by the attempted physical extinction of Catholicism, the tenets of which were considered to undermine the basis of the Confucian world order, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although there were various efforts at reform from within the Confucian system at various points in the Chosun Dynasty (1392-1910), especially after Korea was opened to the world in 1876, they were ineffectual.

The orthodoxy continued both under Japanese colonial authorities, albeit with a different focus, and throughout the republics. The National Security Law and its predecessors, which predate the Korean War, set up ideological limits beyond which it was, and still is, illegal to go. "Anti-state" organizations (meaning those interpreted to be pro-North Korea) are outlawed, and activities and materials that are overly critical of the South's social or political system are still censored. Those espousing such views or holding such materials are subject to arrest under this law, which has a conviction rate of over 98 percent. Although the law was justified as protection against espionage, few were tried for it.

The government's cries for orthodoxy are still not muted in spite of the end of the cold war or the clear deterioration of the North Korean economy. The longest held political prisoner in the world (43

years) was not released until 1995 because he had not repented his orthodox communism and adopted the new orthodoxy of the South. In 1996, after the student demonstrations, the president called for a new ideology to counter the left, even though a state-inspired ideology is in fact contrary to the democratic process and the rights associated with it. When a disaffected public opposition figure defected to North Korea in August 1997, the government party called for an "ideological" investigation of his associates.

Regionalism

The issue of regionalism within the Korean political context has been the subject of much thought and discussion, and will no doubt be an important factor in the forthcoming campaign. It is important because it tends to undercut substantive discussion of issues, as voters are motivated by a primordial loyalty to region before candidates' personalities, programs, or policies.

Regionalism was kept under control during the authoritarian period. It was evident in that the leadership of the state, including both its head and many of its senior administrations, came from the southeast section of the country (Kyongsang), which also received an inordinately large share of the investment in industry and infrastructure. The Cholla provinces of the southwest, site of much of the opposition to the government, were clearly discriminated against in terms of opportunities. The Kwangju (Cholla) incident of May 1980, brutally suppressed by the military, and the persecution by both presidents Park and Chun of Kim Dae Jung, who was from that region, solidified anger that still remains. Regrettably, the bifurcation of southeast and southwest recalls the split in Korea over one thousand years ago along the very same geographical lines. Regional voting patterns are destructive to rational political choices based on issues and leadership qualities.

Progress toward Democratization

Progress toward democratization is evident. It is recognizable in the autonomous functioning of more institutions and in the freedom of individuals to petition government for change as well as to explore new issues intellectually. The population of Korea is among the most literate — indeed among the most educated — in the world, and although a strong and growing sense of nationalism may trigger provincialism, the process of globalization has exposed Koreans to an array of ideas and diverse political concepts, which has affected their

political culture. So, too, the need for international recognition as an "advanced" society prompts reform.

Government has generally acted conservatively in opening to democratic substance. The state's response to reform and liberalization may be characterized as hesitant, reluctant, incomplete, and sometimes inadvertent. Nevertheless, even with this recalcitrance which has characterized all republics to some degree, there has been evident and remarkable progress. The Korean people have in fact forced democratic forms on a reluctant state. They may, over time, be able to force democratic substance on it as well.

International influence has had mixed results. The domination of security interests by the United States, South Korea's mentor for a period, overwhelmed other U.S. interests in a more open market and then in the democratization process. Yet the United States did act to convince Syngman Rhee to leave Korea in 1960, oppose the coup of 1961, force the presidential elections of 1963, press ineffectually for better human rights in the late 1970s, and effectively limit the state's options in using force to prevent demonstrations in 1987. In addition to these public policies, behind the scenes it has saved the lives of Korean dissidents (including Kim Dae Jung) and attempted quietly (but not often successfully) to mitigate other excesses against democratic and human rights.

Other foreign influences have been evident and important as well. The 1988 Seoul Olympics no doubt contributed to liberalization, for the specter of massive anti-government demonstrations would have damaged Korea's international image. Thus resolution of the 1987 crisis was important to Korea's world prestige. Joining the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, the World Trade Organization, and the OECD put pressure on Korea to conform to internationally acceptable practices, only some of which are economic. Others involve equity and rights. The influence of these forces, usually ignored by Korean scholars for natural nationalistic reasons, nevertheless should not go unnoticed.

Korea has been an East Asian anomaly until quite recently because it has rarely seen business compete for political power either through recruitment into the National Assembly or the presidency. Most legislators have not primarily been identified as businessmen, but as literati, military, bureaucrats, journalists, or other members of varying elites. Until recently, commercial success alone did not provide real power (since it was largely controlled by the state) and, perhaps more importantly, no real respect. This has changed. The first

businessman ran for president in 1992, receiving about 12 percent of the vote, and it is likely that as business has shaken loose from overly stringent government controls, since the state needs business as much or even more than business needs the state, we will witness more active political roles for many businessmen. This will increase the prospects for pluralism, which is an advantage, but may also complicate issues of social equity.

If this analysis of political change in Korea is accurate, then what of the future? It is likely to be different. The forces for democratization in all fiends have built up, and thus the government, which internally has become more pluralistic, will likely be less resistant to liberalization. Barring a national catastrophe on the peninsula, which seems unlikely, the process will continue. As liberalization and alternative sources of information expand, and with technology far beyond the state's capacity for control even if it wished to exert it, the international forces that have both assisted and retarded democratization will be on the side of reform.

Even as this election approaches, politicians and parties may band together or separate as each considers the projected realities of the political process in Korea. Although this may be considered a weakness of the political system, it is also a sign of the growing maturity of pluralization, the basis on which substantive democracy may be built.

The acceleration of change, already remarkable, is likely to increase. But the heritage of state intervention and the inchoate call for conformity are likely to persist at the same time. The process of democratization is thus virtually irreversible, but it will occur in a distinctly Korean manner. Foreign observers may eventually call Korea some form of hyphenated democracy, but the progress that has been manifest is unlikely to be reversed.



Note

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