

Change and Continuity in Korean Political Culture An Overview

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The South Korean political system has undergone drastic changes since the establishment of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1948. Following the authoritarian Syngman Rhee regime (1948-1960), South Korea had to endure over a quarter-century of military rule, from 1961 to 1987. In the wake of massive student demonstrations against the Chun Doo Hwan regime in 1987, the historic June 29th declaration was issued to accommodate popular demands for the democratization of the political system. It promised drastic democratic reforms, including popular direct election of the president. Following the presidential election of 1987, South Korea embarked on a new era of democratic politics.

The purpose of this paper is to examine change and continuity in South Korea's political culture since the establishment of the Republic of Korea. The first section will analyze the components of traditional (authoritarian) Korean political culture, followed by an analysis in the second section of subsequent changes induced by American influence, rapid industrialization, and socioeconomic development between 1961 and the 1980s. The third section will discuss how traditional political culture still influences the political behavior of South Koreans and what implications this has for the future of Korean democracy.

In this paper, Korean political culture is defined as a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes about politics which are widely shared among Koreans. Political culture is not static, but dynamic, changing slowly over time. It is generally acknowledged that political culture is transmitted from one generation to the next through the process of political socialization. Among several agents influencing the process, the most important ones are (1) the family, (2) schools, (3) peer groups, and (4) the mass media.¹

The Influence of Confucianism

Korean political culture has been deeply influenced by Confucianism, the official state doctrine of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910). Confucian moral principles and ethical norms regulating human relations permeated traditional Korean society. Under the Confucian system, the fundamental goal of government was to create harmony and unity among men and between man and the universe. Provided that the king exemplified moral behavior by acting in accordance with Confucian precepts, his subjects would voluntarily emulate him and thereby ensure harmony in the sociopolitical order. The king ruled as the symbolic head of his extensive family, the Korean people.² Obviously, such idealistic theory was violated in practice, as paternalism frequently became despotism. Indeed, on occasion, subjects would revolt against their rulers.

The government was the exclusive domain and responsibility of the king and the *yangban* aristocracy. Theoretically, the bureaucracy was open to all who passed the civil service examination, but in actuality commoners were excluded from participating in the examination. Only the offspring of the *yangban* class, based on their access to privilege and their status at birth, were able to receive the tutorial instruction required to prepare for the examination.³

Confucianism placed great emphasis on maintaining a hierarchical social order, stressing that an individual's social identity was to be defined in the context of collectivity, particularly within the context of family and kinship in Korea. The primary focus of loyalty was, therefore, to family and kinship group, not to the state. The authority of the superior over the inferior was almost absolute, as with father over son and elder brother over younger brother. To be sure, a rigid code of ethics guided behavior in such relationships.⁴ This gave special strength to the groups (e.g., the family) in this hierarchically arranged society.

As political power was the monopoly of the king, who ruled under the Mandate of Heaven - with his ministers and the bureaucracy recruited through competitive civil service examinations - commoners were mere "subjects," who were required to comply obediently with the orders and commands of the royal government. Thus, Korean political culture under the Choson dynasty was essentially a "subject political culture," which was conducive to the maintenance of an authoritarian political system that persisted until 1910. As in many other traditional societies, although commoners constituted over 80

percent of the populace, they had no active role to play in the political process.⁵

The political values fostered under the Confucian political system were obedience, loyalty, filial piety, and faithfulness, such virtues being regarded as essential for good, loyal subjects. In short, Korean Confucianism became an elitist, anti-egalitarian, and anti-democratic ideology.⁶ Individual rights and liberty were alien to the Confucian outlook. Rather, the hierarchical relationship extending from the king to the lowliest subject stressed obligations over rights, and authority from above over representation from below. At the same time, the superior-inferior pattern of relationships and the predominance of the group, particularly the family, over the individual made it difficult for individualism to develop.

Finally, Confucianism was a status-quo oriented, conservative doctrine which attempted to promote moral-ethical principles in order to maintain a peaceful political system. Confucian virtues of loyalty and filial piety contributed to the creation of a social ethos fostering stability and harmony. Nevertheless, as Kim Kyong-Dong points out, Confucianism as practiced in Korea was "not conducive to modernization." Rather, it was initially an obstacle.⁷ Moreover, Confucianism in the mid-nineteenth century in Korea was not keen about commerce and industry, which "belonged to a lowly place in the traditional status hierarchy." Modernization had to wait until the Western powers forced Korea to open its door and make adaptive changes in the face of the pervasive "international acculturation called modernization."⁸

Following the fall of the Choson dynasty in 1910, Korea was subjected to thirty-five years of harsh Japanese colonial rule. Although the Japanese system modified the traditional Korean social structure by abolishing the special status and privileges of the *yangban* class and creating conditions for some commoners to rise to form a middle class, Japanese rule made all Koreans second-rate subjects of the Japanese emperor, for they were neither granted the suffrage nor allowed to participate in the political process, even though the Japanese Diet enacted the universal manhood suffrage law in 1925.

Japanese colonial rule over Korea left political legacies which were bound to affect Korean political culture. Perhaps the most important legacy of Japanese rule was its reinforcement of authoritarian political culture in Korea, as Japanese colonial officials dictated political affairs while mistreating Koreans. After the Manchurian incident of 1931, the colonial government attempted the

Japanization of Koreans. For this purpose, it adopted many slogans and programs to assimilate Koreans and to indoctrinate them into becoming willing instruments of Japanese imperialism, then bent on continental expansion in Asia.

Japanese officials used various methods of indoctrination. Public schools became important agents of political assimilation under the Japanese. In addition, the mass media, such as magazines, pamphlets, radio, and movies, were used to convert Koreans to the Japanese ideology and way of life,⁹ emphasizing the importance of loyalty, self-sacrifice, and dedication to the Japanese emperor. These indoctrination and assimilation practices, however, failed to achieve the desired objectives, because Japanese officials never treated Koreans equally even though they forced them to adopt Japanese names, language and culture.

In spite of the official slogans advocating unity between Japanese and Koreans, racial discrimination against Koreans was systematic and rampant. For example, all the highest positions, most of those above the rank of clerk in the colonial government, were held by Japanese.¹⁰ Moreover, as suffrage was not granted to Koreans, they remained not only second-class citizens but also people without any legitimate channel for political participation under the Japanese. Thus, the Japanese slogan, "Coexistence and coprosperity," was meant primarily for the enrichment of the Japanese at the expense of the Koreans. The Japanese officials' often brutal treatment of Koreans (such as torturing political prisoners) left a bitter legacy.¹¹

Emergence of Bureaucratic Authoritarianism

Following the surrender of Japan on August 15, 1945, the liberated but divided Korea was to undergo a drastic transformation. Under the United States occupation (1945 to 1948), South Korea came to learn the meaning of liberal democracy, as the American military government granted freedom of thought, speech, the press, and assembly to the Koreans. In the post-liberation era, political parties and groups mushroomed overnight.

Moreover, with the restoration of religious freedom in the post-liberation period, Christian churches sprang up all over South Korea and became a dominant factor in cultural and social progress. Meanwhile, the newly introduced American culture (e.g., songs, films, dance, and ideas) exerted considerable influence on Koreans. American influence was also keenly felt in the political realm, as the Republic of Korea was established in 1948 under American auspices.

To be sure, South Korea did not become a democratic nation overnight. The authoritarian political heritage and Confucian social order of the past, the legacies of Japanese colonial rule, and the division of the country all constituted serious obstacles to the development of democratic institutions and a new way of life. Although the authoritarian regimes from 1948 to 1987 fostered the illusion of "Korean style democracy," the political process drastically deviated from the norms of a liberal democratic political system.

First of all, the constitution became no more than a political document. The growing disparity between democratic constitutional ideals and naked authoritarian practices inevitably created cynicism, distrust and outright antagonism among the people who came to oppose the government and politicians. To be sure, democratic formalities were maintained, and presidential and parliamentary elections were held regularly, even during the Korean War. However, political leaders and government bureaucrats were not equipped to accomplish democratic goals. Many of them were born and trained under Japanese rule and had been immersed in traditional authoritarian political culture and social practices.

Government leaders beginning with Syngman Rhee tolerated no opposition and were surrounded by men who were willing to obey their commands. They demanded absolute loyalty from their followers. In addition to being corrupt, incompetent, authoritarian, and accustomed to exercising nepotism and favoritism, self-righteousness (*toksonjui*) became a trademark of a number of such political leaders.¹²

Another major weakness hampering the development of a true South Korean democracy was the inability to develop a viable political party system. The major weakness of Korean political parties was that they were organized around a person rather than focusing on certain ideologies or programs. Thus, when the leader of the party either died or fell, the party collapsed. A fragile unity among party members characterized all political parties. Disputes and schism resulting essentially from differences in personalities, regionalism, and loyalties of the boss-follower type persisted, hindering the development of a meaningful party system. The leaders of political parties also lacked the spirit of compromise, whether they dealt with the opposition parties or with intra-party policies.

Most party leaders were primarily concerned with getting votes, by whatever means available. Party members did not dare to challenge the ideas and policies of the leaders. Instead, they were mainly concerned with the distribution of top party positions and

securing high government posts for themselves. When party leadership was weak, the members were split into bickering factions contending for power.

People's perceptions of democracy did not develop adequately as they maintained the traditional mode of thinking and behaving. While an increasing number of Koreans criticized bureaucratic authoritarianism as manifested in the form of *kwanjon minbi* (respect for the government and scorn for the people), the majority regarded obedience to the government as proper. They failed to develop the idea that the government is the servant of the people and that sovereignty resides in the people. Many regarded the president of the republic as a newly elected monarch and showed him the respect appropriate for an imperial presidency. Their resentment of excessive control notwithstanding, the people supported the efforts of the government to control people in the name of national security.¹³

Also, the politicization of the military overshadowed the development of the democratic process. The meaning and consequences of the politicization of the military were not fully understood until after the military takeover of the government in 1961. The emergence of the military junta which ruled the country until 1963, and the rise of former high-ranking military officers to top political positions after 1963, inevitably created additional obstacles to the democratic process.

Under the leadership of the generals-turned-politicians, bureaucratic authoritarianism not only severely hindered but consistently suppressed popular attempts to democratize the political system. The politicized Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) was deeply involved in domestic politics, abusing the power of investigation and torturing numerous individuals. Indeed, it was regarded as the real power in the government, as the director of the KCIA was the second most powerful person during the dark days when the former generals Park and Chun were in power.

Another instrument of repression wielded by government leaders in Korea was the politicized national police. Police intervention in the election process, violation of civil rights, suppression of freedom, and abuse of power were ubiquitous under the authoritarian regimes headed by Rhee, Park, and Chun. The police became a government weapon in suppressing democracy in South Korea.

Under these circumstances, it was difficult, if not futile, to expect the development of viable democratic institutions in South

Korea. Nevertheless, the struggle for democracy continued throughout the post-Korean War era and triumphed at last during the summer of 1987, when the Chun government accepted the popular demands for democratization of the polity, including direct popular election of the president and a new democratic constitution. On the basis of Chun's concessions, a presidential election was held in December 1987 and a democratic constitution was adopted in the beginning of 1988, which marked the beginning of a new era of democratic government in Korea.

Developing a Democratic System

The task of establishing a democratic political system was not easy. As Kim Chong-Lim points out, South Koreans' inability to establish a democratic political system from 1948 to the mid-1980s could be ascribed to (1) unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, (2) weak institutional structures, and (3) the lack of democratic political culture.¹⁴

First, it is generally accepted among political scientists that there are strong correlations between the level of a country's socioeconomic development and the likelihood of its developing a democratic polity.¹⁵ Democracy is easier to develop in an economically affluent society than in an underdeveloped, poor society. Evidently, economic modernization fosters social and political diversity, which in turn stimulates political competition, a requisite for a democratic political system. Socioeconomic conditions in South Korea, as a poor, agrarian society, were not conducive to the development of a democratic political system; but conditions changed in the 1980s, when South Korea emerged as a modern industrial society.

Second, a viable democratic political system requires several institutional devices to ensure open and orderly competition. In addition to a democratic constitutional framework, a stable party system, autonomous interest groups, local autonomy, a free press, a free electoral system, and an independent judiciary are required. These institutions facilitate political competition, restrain the abuse of power, protect personal civil rights and liberties, and impose legitimate rules by which conflicts can be peacefully resolved. Without institutional safeguards, a democratic process can degenerate into a dictatorship or chaos.¹⁶ Until 1987, South Korea had constitutions which appeared democratic but did not provide a democratic political framework. Instead, they supported authoritarian regimes.

Third, in order for a democratic political system to operate effectively, political culture consonant with the democratic process is

required. For no matter how democratic a constitutional framework may appear, as Kim Chong-Lim remarks, "if not seriously taken and practiced by the leaders and people, a democratic political system cannot develop."¹⁷ A democratic "participant political culture" is necessary to sustain a democratic political system, because in such a culture, citizens are well informed about public affairs, actively participate in various aspects of the political process, and are strongly allegiant to the political system. A stable democracy is unattainable unless undergirded by strong cultural norms and values that allow "the peaceful 'play' of power."¹⁸ Only when the people exhibit a consistent belief in democracy can they have a firm enough commitment to maintain such a system.

As several studies have demonstrated, the incongruity between formal, democratic political institutions and the cultural environment of authoritarianism in which they functioned was a major cause of the inability to develop a democratic polity in Korea from 1948 to the 1960s.¹⁹ The situation began to change, however, as South Korean society underwent industrialization beginning in the early 1960s. It is generally accepted that a society's industrializing process is conducive to the establishment of a democratic political system, as it entails basic changes in life styles and social relations while undermining the traditional social and political values, beliefs, and attitudes which inhibit or constrain democratic development.²⁰

From 1963 to the late 1980s, South Korea's economic development was phenomenal. The GNP grew more than 10 percent per year. During this period, Korean society experienced a massive transformation from a traditionally agrarian society to a dynamic industrial economy. By the early 1980s, South Korea had become one of the world's middle income, industrializing countries. Per capita GNP in 1980 was already above \$1,500.²¹ By 1990, it was reported to be over \$6,500. Thus, by the latter part of the 1980s, South Korea was able to meet the basic requirements of economic modernization needed to sustain a democratic political system.

Another significant development accompanying the rapid industrialization in South Korea has been urbanization. Between 1945 and 1980, the urban population grew from 14.5 percent to 57.2 percent. Today, over 74 percent of South Koreans live in urban areas.²² As millions of people came to live in urban areas, they were exposed to new ideas and modern values and became politically better informed.

It was the phenomenal growth of the educational system which had perhaps the most significant impact on the political culture of

South Koreans. School enrollments increased from less than 1.4 million pupils in 1945 to 5.7 million pupils by 1980.²³ By 1996, more than 8 million pupils were enrolled. College enrollment has also increased rapidly, from less than 8,000 students in 1945 to 600,000 students by 1980. By 1995, total college enrollments stood at over 1.8 million.²⁴ At the same time, the literacy rate had increased from 22 percent in 1945 to well over 90 percent by 1980. Today, the literacy rate is 97 percent.²⁵

Schools are regarded as one of the most important agents of political socialization, and indeed the rapid expansion in educational enrollments has had unmistakable effects on the political culture of the younger generation, born after 1945. Through textbooks and classroom instruction, the post-liberation generations have been taught that democracy is the best form of government. Many came to acquire democratic values, beliefs, and attitudes. A large number of college students stood in the forefront of the struggle against the dictatorial South Korean regimes from the 1960s to the 1980s.

Another significant corollary of rapid industrialization has been the dramatic expansion of mass communications. By 1980, there were nearly 2.8 million telephone subscribers, representing a twentyfold increase since 1962.²⁶ Radios and television sets have also become popular household items in South Korea. By 1980, there were more than 150 television sets per 1,000 persons;²⁷ today, almost every household has a television set. Newspaper subscriptions also rose rapidly, from 5.2 copies per 100 persons in 1965 to 23.5 copies per 100 persons by 1979. Such rapid expansion of the mass media has facilitated popular contact with new ideas and modern values. In fact, there are clear indications that the mass media have been playing an increasingly important role in the political socialization of South Koreans, as more people rely upon the mass media, especially television, for political information.

In short, South Korean society has undergone massive social and economic changes in the process of rapid industrialization. Many new ideas and values that were alien to the traditional culture have been introduced and diffused into the society. More importantly, more Koreans have acquired democratic values and concepts such as political participation, equality, freedom, majority rule, and individual rights.²⁸ As they have absorbed democratic values and have been willing to defend their civil rights and liberties, it has become untenable for the leaders of an authoritarian regime to stonewall popular demands for democratization. By 1987, in fact, South Korea

was able to meet the two other basic requirements for the establishment of a democratic political system: a nascent democratic constitutional framework and an emerging democratic political culture.

To be sure, the new beliefs and values accompanied by rapid industrialization have often been added to, and not fully integrated with, the existing ones. Thus, contemporary Korean culture may be best described as "a complex mixture of old and new values and cognitions," with the proportions varying by individuals and social groupings.²⁹ The coexistence of the new and old beliefs and values has not only given rise to cultural tension and unrest at the social level but has also generated inconsistencies among beliefs and values at the individual level.³⁰

Korean Political Culture Today

What are the characteristics of Korean political culture today? According to Korean scholars, the major characteristics of South Korean political culture are (1) authoritarianism, (2) civic orientation, (3) collectivism (an orientation stressing collectivity over individual members, like familism), (4) alienation, (5) factionalism, (6) propensity to resistance, and (7) national identity (or nationalism). Some have added anti-communism as another distinct element of South Korean political culture.³¹

A civic orientation, the propensity to resist or protest, and national identity (or nationalism) may be considered as conducive to a democratic polity, whereas the remaining characteristics have been dysfunctional in the Korean democratic political process.³² These relatively nondemocratic elements are legacies of both the Choson dynasty's Confucian culture and Japanese colonial rule. In other words, Japanese militaristic, bureaucratic, and authoritarian political culture reinforced nondemocratic components of the traditional Korean political culture. The civic orientation, on the other hand, was enhanced by American influence in the post-liberation period, as the new democratic institutions and education tended to strengthen such an orientation. The propensity to resist developed historically in the process of resistance to foreign invasions as well as a struggle against unjust and illegitimate rule.³³ Until the 1980s, even though the institutional forms adopted from the West appeared democratic, the deeply rooted nondemocratic culture made it difficult for the system to function democratically.³⁴

The situation has been gradually changing since 1987. Collectivism and factionalism still remain strong in the political arena,

while the authoritarian tendency has begun to decline, albeit slowly.³⁵ Alienation has been greatly alleviated as a result of the democratization of the polity. Although legacies of the old systems are not likely to disappear immediately, the trend seems to be moving toward further democratization and the strengthening of democratic political culture.³⁶ Apparently, more Koreans (i.e., 60 percent) are supportive of democracy and democratic values; nevertheless, a fairly large minority (i.e., 40 percent) does not believe in either democracy or democratic values.³⁷

According to a survey conducted by Bae Ho Han and Soo Young Auh in 1984, such traditional values as obedience, elitism, and personalism are still widely held by Koreans. While maintaining such traditional values, a majority of South Koreans also subscribe to democratic political values such as equality, tolerance, and individual rights.³⁸ Thus, many South Koreans do share both traditional and democratic values simultaneously, apparently with varying degrees of difference. Accordingly, Han and Auh have classified political value orientations of Koreans into three different types: (1) the obedient type - those who have strong traits of traditional values (obedience, elitism, and personalism) while maintaining weak sentiments toward the four democratic values (trust, equality, tolerance, and individual rights); (2) the critical participant type - those who have weak traits of traditional values and strong subscription to democratic political values; and (3) the accommodating type - those who have modern values but weak democratic values, or those who may have traditional social values but strong democratic political values. According to the survey, the obedient type constitute approximately 30 percent of the population; the accommodating type, about 40 percent; and the critical participant type, the remaining 30 percent.³⁹ Han and Auh have concluded, "If it has to be defined in one sentence, the Korean political culture can be characterized as an accommodating type."⁴⁰

In addition to Han and Auh's survey, conducted in 1984, essential to the understanding of Korean political culture is the opinion survey conducted by Lee Jeong-Bok in 1988, which was patterned after the five-nations civic culture survey conducted by Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in 1960. Lee's survey has provided not only important empirical data on the attitudinal dimension of Korean political culture but also a comparative perspective on it.⁴¹

First, regarding the patterns of political cognition, a majority of South Koreans were aware of current political affairs, as 79 percent of them read political news in daily newspapers, and 78.9 percent

watched daily television newscasts.⁴² As a result, their level of political awareness was relatively high. Only 23.7 percent of the Korean respondents had low levels of political information and knowledge, whereas Almond and Verba's data for low levels of political information were 8 percent (West Germany), 13 percent (U.S.), 13 percent (Great Britain), 33 percent (Italy), and 35 percent (Mexico).⁴³ Thus, as compared to the five nations covered in the civic culture survey, South Koreans' level of political knowledge was slightly lower than that of the Americans and the British but about the same level as the Italians' in 1960.

Regarding the awareness of the impact of national government on daily life, 63.8 percent of the Korean respondents recognized the impact of their national government's activities on their daily life. That figure was lower than Almond and Verba's data for the same question for the U.S. (85 percent), Great Britain (73 percent), and West Germany (70 percent)⁴⁴, but higher than those for Italy (54 percent) and Mexico (30 percent). Also, 61.2 percent of the Korean respondents agreed that the outcome of the National Assembly elections would affect their daily life.

Second, regarding political participation, South Koreans' voting rates of 89.2 percent in presidential elections and 83.4 percent in parliamentary elections were much higher than the voter turnouts in similar elections in the U.S. (i.e., 51 percent and 69 percent).⁴⁵ Koreans' voting rates were also higher than those of the British, the Germans, the Italians, and the Mexicans. Nevertheless, in other areas of political participation such as joining political parties and participating in political rallies, election campaigning, lobbying, and other related activities, Koreans' involvement was relatively low. For example, a majority of Koreans (52.7 percent) indicated their reluctance to get involved in politics, while 46.3 percent indicated their willingness to participate in politics.⁴⁶

Third, South Koreans had a low level of political efficacy (or confidence in their ability to influence the policymaking process), largely because a majority of the people (65.4 percent) felt that a small number of people decided governmental affairs and politics without paying attention to popular wishes. Over 80 percent of the respondents felt that their opinions were not reflected in government policies.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, 66.3 percent of the respondents were willing to take action against the misdeeds of government officials if they encountered them. Furthermore, 68.4 percent believed that they could rectify an unjust regulation or law. The figure for Korea was lower than Almond

and Verba's data on the same question in the U.S. (77 percent) and Great Britain (78 percent), but higher than in West Germany (62 percent), Italy (51 percent) and Mexico (52 percent).⁴⁸

Fourth, insofar as their evaluation of the government and politics was concerned, South Koreans as a whole had negative feelings and attitudes. When asked to list the things of which they were most proud, only 0.7 percent of the respondents listed Korean government and politics. Almond and Verba's data for the five nations covered in the civic culture survey were much higher: 81 percent for the U.S., 46 percent for Great Britain, 30 percent for Mexico, 7 percent for West Germany, and 3 percent for Italy.⁴⁹ Conversely, when the Korean respondents were asked to list the item of which they were most ashamed, over 49 percent of them listed government and politics. Furthermore, 64.4 percent of South Koreans expressed their dissatisfaction with current domestic politics.⁵⁰ Only 26.8 percent of the respondents regarded the Roh Tae-Woo government as "democratic," whereas 61.5 percent considered it a "mixture" of democratic and dictatorial qualities.⁵¹ The remainder (8.9 percent) regarded it as a "dictatorship."

South Koreans' feelings of political alienation were also reflected in their expectations of "unequal treatment by government bureaucracy and police." Nearly one third (32 percent) of the respondents did not expect equal treatment from the bureaucracy, while their expectations for "unequal treatment from the police" were even higher (36 percent). Such survey data indicated that South Koreans expected much worse treatment from the bureaucracy and police as compared to similar data reported in Almond and Verba's study in the U.S. (9 percent and 8 percent, respectively), Great Britain (7 percent and 6 percent), West Germany (9 percent and 5 percent) and Italy (13 percent and 10 percent).⁵² The only country where people had lower expectations from the bureaucracy and the police was Mexico (50 percent and 57 percent).

According to a regression analysis of the Han-Auh 1988 survey data by Lee Kap Yun, degree of satisfaction with the government was closely related to age and education: the younger generation were highly dissatisfied with the government, while the older and less-educated were the least dissatisfied.⁵³ Also, the sense of political efficacy was correlated to the level of education: the more educated, the greater the sense of political efficacy. On the other hand, trust in government or support for the government was inversely correlated to age and education: the younger and better-educated had less trust and

support for the government than the older Koreans with less education.⁵⁴

It is quite evident that rapid industrialization has generated inconsistencies in the beliefs and values of individual citizens.⁵⁵ As a result, in spite of the fact that South Korea has succeeded in establishing a democratic political system following the intense struggle in the spring and summer of 1987, we have been witnessing political behavior reflecting traditional political culture in South Korea, which could undermine the development of a democratic system. Among the more salient cultural traits plaguing the development of democracy in South Korea have been: (1) regionalism, (2) factionalism, and (3) the disinclination to compromise. Persistence of these political tendencies can inevitably distort democratic political processes and outcomes.

First, excessive regionalism has continued to be a major obstacle to the institutionalization of democratic practices in South Korea. Most theories of political development connect the degree of political development with the disappearance of such primordial sentiments as regionalism and other politically divisive cultural elements (e.g., religion, language, and ethnicity).⁵⁶ Regionalism has played a significant role in national elections as well as in the recruitment and promotion of high-ranking government officials and bureaucrats since the early 1960s. As Dong Wonmo and others have pointed out, the regionally based cleavage in Korean politics (the regional rivalry between Youngnam and Honam regions) has progressively worsened with each presidential election since 1971.⁵⁷

The two most important causes of regional cleavage between the Youngnam and Honam regions can be attributed to (1) the economic development policy of Presidents Park, Chun, and Roh Tae-Woo, all natives of the Youngnam region, who provided preferential treatment to their home region while neglecting or discriminating against the Honam region in economic development; and (2) these generals-turned-politicians' preferential treatment of the Youngnam natives in the recruitment and promotion of a political elite (e.g., cabinet members and high-ranking bureaucrats).⁵⁸

Government favoritism toward the Youngnam region in economic development and the staffing of governmental institutions with elites from the same southeastern region, together with the predominant importance of the informal regional networks in the political process, have not only exacerbated Korean sociopolitical tensions but also have evoked strong reactions and resistance from the

Honamites, who have come to harbor an acute sense of relative deprivation and deep resentment against the Youngnamite-dominated government from 1963 to 1998, including the Kim Young-Sam government (1993-1998), another Youngnamite-led government.

Since 1971, the Honamites have expressed their resentment against the regime dominated by leaders from Youngnam by casting their votes increasingly for Kim Dae-Jung, a native son of the Honam region.⁵⁹ In the 1987 presidential election, Kim received 88.5 percent of the Honam vote, while the remainder was divided among the other three candidates. In the 1992 presidential election, he garnered 90.8 percent of the Honam vote, while the other two candidates divided the remainder. In the 1997 presidential election, Kim Dae-Jung not only won the presidency but also received an unprecedented 94 percent of the votes in the Honam region.⁶⁰ To be sure, regionally oriented voting behavior was also conspicuous in the Youngnam region after 1971. In that year, Park received 71.2 percent of the vote, and in 1992 candidate Kim Young-Sam (another Youngnam native) received 68.8 percent.⁶¹

The fierce rivalry and animosity between the Youngnam and the Honam regions have not only poisoned the political environment of South Korea but also alienated millions of Honam voters from the political system. Such an abnormal regionalism must be overcome if a democratic political system is to develop in South Korea, for excessive regional polarization will be detrimental to the national unity.

Second, Korean democracy must overcome its vulnerability to factionalism arising from the overlapping of primordial and patron-client political ties. The recent electoral outcomes and realignment of political forces have vividly illustrated the resilience of this traditional pattern of political behavior. For example, the intense strife between the Kim Young-Sam and the Kim Dae-Jung factions within the major opposition party in 1987 resulted not only in a party split but also in the inability to field a single opposition candidate in that year's presidential election, handing the victory to Roh Tae-Woo. Unless factionalism is contained within manageable limits, it could undermine the existence of the democratic political system itself, as the case of the Second Republic under Prime Minister Chang Myon so clearly demonstrated during 1960-61. The government was paralyzed by the factional strife between the New and the Old factions within the ruling Democratic Party, which paved the way for the fall of the short-lived democratic republic in 1961.⁶²

Since a faction or a clique is frequently organized around a particular leader and not ideas or ideologies, followers normally would

not dare to challenge the ideas and policies of the leader. Instead, they are mainly concerned with the distribution of top party positions or the securing of high government posts. Based on hierarchical superior-inferior relationships, subordinates of a powerful factional boss become virtual "vassals" of the all-powerful political lord. Such an authoritarian hierarchical clique operates like the Japanese groups which are known for the so-called *oyabun-kobun* relationship,⁶³ where the followers tend to develop an uncritical, blind, and total personal loyalty. When such a group or faction takes over the government, the key positions in the government are distributed too often among important faction members as rewards for their loyal service to the leader rather than on the basis of merit (e.g., the Hanahwae under the Chun and Roh governments, or the so-called "Democratic Party clique" under the Kim Young-Sam government). Such anachronistic cronyism is detrimental to the development of a viable democratic system.

Third, the Confucian proclivity to convert political conflict into a morality play makes it difficult for parties to compromise. Conflicts in Korean politics often become "deadly contests over moral issues" and are couched in moral terms which are difficult to resolve. Therefore, traditional Korean political culture is not conducive to compromise, bargaining, or pragmatic negotiations.⁶⁴ Instead, politicians tend to display a strong sense of self-righteousness. Moreover, when a person takes a political stance, he is expected to do so with an "iron inflexibility."⁶⁵ Such a rigidity inevitably dooms any possibility of political compromise. Also, such behavioral norms intensify political polarization rather than facilitating compromise solutions. Under the authoritarian governments of Park and Chun, as the government attempted to break up a major opposition party by playing political tricks, compromise of any sort with the government was regarded as political treachery by many opposition politicians. Thus, at the level of partisan politics, Korean politicians have frequently committed the sin of *kukhan tujaeng* (a duel to the death).⁶⁶ Until such time as they become more rational, tolerant, and pragmatic in their approach to politics and are willing to accept a set of rules of fair play in the political arena, an orderly process of political competition is unlikely to develop.

Conclusion

From the foregoing analysis, a few basic conclusions can be drawn: First, traditional authoritarian political culture nurtured under Confucianism and reinforced by Japanese colonial rule was essentially

a subject political culture which did not allow most Koreans to play any significant role in the input aspect of the political system. Such a culture was conducive to the maintenance of the authoritarian political system in Korea.

Second, following Korea's liberation from Japanese rule by the United States in 1945, South Koreans were influenced by Western culture, and especially by the democratic political culture of the United States. Although a democratic republic was established under American auspices in 1948, the development of a democratic political system was not an easy task, as many political leaders were affected by authoritarian political culture inculcated under Japanese colonial rule and were unfamiliar with democratic values and beliefs. As a result, it took approximately four decades of trial and error before a democratic system could be established in South Korea.

Third, South Koreans' political culture underwent a substantial change during the period of rapid industrialization and urbanization from the early 1960s to the latter part of the 1980s. As a result of rapid modernization, more Koreans came to acquire democratic values and norms from schools and the mass media, which have played important roles in political socialization. Classroom instruction in democracy inevitably inculcated democratic political values and orientations among the new generation of Koreans. At the same time, rapid expansion of the mass media, especially television, has facilitated the dissemination of democratic ideas and values to the older generation as well. As more people have come to acquire democratic political culture, it has become increasingly untenable for the authoritarian regime to resist popular demands for democratization.

Fourth, South Korean political culture is in the process of transition from an authoritarian subject political culture to a democratic participant political culture. Since residues of traditional political culture coexist with the newly acquired democratic values and ideas, many South Koreans display inconsistencies in their beliefs and values. Until the majority of Koreans become firmly committed to democratic ideas and values, South Korea's democratic political system will likely remain fragile and tentative.

Finally, in order to consolidate the democratic polity in South Korea, it is necessary to eliminate certain cultural traits rooted in the traditional authoritarian political culture, namely excessive regionalism and regional orientations, factionalism, and the disinclination to compromise. These tendencies are detrimental to the development of a democratic polity, for they tend to poison the political environment

while making it difficult to develop healthy and open political competition among political parties and groups under the rules of the democratic "game."



Notes

The original version of this paper was presented at the 1998 Conference on Change and Continuity in Korean Culture, University of South Carolina, Columbia, on May 15-17, 1998.

1. Gabriel A. Almond and G. Bingham Powell, *Comparative Politics Today: A World View* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1996), pp. 36-47. See also Austin Ranney, *The Governing: An Introduction to Political Science* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996), pp. 55-67.

2. Young Whan Kihl, "The Legacy of Confucian Culture and South Korean Politics and Economics: An Interpretation," in Sang Yong Choi, ed., *Democracy in Korea* (Seoul: Korean Political Science Association, 1997), pp. 121-22.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 116-17.

4. Andrew Nahm, *A History of the Korean People: Tradition and Transformation* (Elizabeth, NJ: Holym International Corp., 1998), pp. 113-15.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 101. See also Sung Chul Yang, "The Korean Political Culture: A Historical Analysis," in Korean Political Science Association and Association of Korean Political Scientists in North America, *Proceedings of the Sixth Joint Conference, August 5-7, 1985* (Seoul: Korean Political Science Association, 1985), p. 6.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

7. Kyong Dong Kim, "Confucianism, Economic Growth and Democracy," *Asian Perspectives* 22, 2 (Fall 1997), pp. 84-85.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

9. Nahm, *History of the Korean People*, p. 254.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 226. According to Nahm, in 1936, 52,570 out of 87,552 officials of the colonial government in Korea were Japanese. Furthermore, more than 80 percent of the higher ranks, 60 percent of the intermediate ranks, and about 50 percent of clerical positions were occupied by Japanese.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 259.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 478

14. Chong Lim Kim, "Potential for Democratic Change in a Divided Nation," in Ipyong Kim and Young Whan Kihl, eds., *Political Change in South Korea* (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1988), pp. 44-72.
15. Ibid., p. 48. See also Seymour Martin Lipset, "Some Requisites of Democracy," *American Political Science Review* 53, 1 (March 1959), pp. 75-85.
16. Chong Lim Kim, "Potential for Democratic Change," pp. 48-49.
17. Ibid., p. 49.
18. Lipset, "Some Requisites of Democracy," p. 71.
19. John K. Oh, *Korea: Democracy on Trial* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 191; Sungjoo Han, *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1974), pp. 1-6. Gregory Henderson mentions that social and cultural homogeneity and centralism also constitute obstacles to democratization in South Korea. See Gregory Henderson, *Korea: The Politics of Vortex* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), pp. 361-76.
20. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," in Hong Yung Lee and Dal-Joong Chang, eds., *Political Authority and Economic Exchange in Korea* (Seoul: Oruem Publishing House, 1994), p. 65. See also Lipset, "Some Requisites of Democracy," pp. 75-85.
21. Ibid., pp. 65-66.
22. Yun Kim, "The Current Political Dynamics and Globalization of Korea," in Eui Hang Shin, ed., *Korea in Global Community: Past, Present, and Future* (Columbia, SC: Center for Asian Studies, University of South Carolina, 1996), p. 217.
23. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 67.
24. Ibid.
25. Yun Kim, "Current Political Dynamics," p. 218.
26. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," pp. 67-68.
27. Ibid., p. 68.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., p. 69.
30. Ibid. See also Do Chull Shin, "Democratization in Korea As Perceived by Its Mass Public," in *A Collection of Theses on Korean Studies* (Seoul: Korea Foundation, 1995), pp. 11-32. According to Shin, nearly 40 percent of South Koreans refused to subscribe to the notion that democracy is the best form of government. Among those who choose democracy over authoritarian systems, 43 percent do not desire to transform the political system into a complete democracy. Instead, they prefer to live in a partially democratized political system. Furthermore, according to Shin, nearly one-third (30 percent) of South Koreans are "uncommitted to" democracy, while a plurality (44 percent) of the South Korean population is fully committed to democracy. See *ibid.*, pp. 23-24. The data were collected in the fall of 1991.

31. Bae Ho Han and Soo Young Auh, *Hankuk Jeongchi Munhwa* (Seoul: Bupmunsa, 1987), p. 29. See also Myong Soon Shin, "Jeongchi Munhwa wa Minjuui," in *Hyundai Hankuk Jeongchi ron* (Seoul: Bupmunsa, 1986), pp. 272-75.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 274.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 201.
35. According to an opinion survey conducted by Han and Auh, 54.1 percent of the respondents believed that "it is proper and right for the people to obey their superiors and people in high positions," while 45.3 percent of the respondents disagreed. To another question, whether "society will improve when it is led by several able leaders rather than by the masses," 49.8 percent of respondents agreed, whereas 49.1 percent disagreed. See Han and Auh, *Hankuk Jeongchi Munhwa*, pp. 58-59.
36. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 69. See also Shin, "Democratization in Korea," p. 32.
37. Shin, "Democratization in Korea," pp. 23-24.
38. Han and Auh, *Hankuk Jeongchi Munhwa*, pp. 58-69.
39. *Ibid.*, pp. 239-52, esp. 248.
40. *Ibid.*, pp. 253-54.
41. Jeong Bok Lee, *Hankuk Jeongchi eui Ihae* (Seoul: Seoul Daehakkyo Chulpanbu, 1995), pp. 212-76.
42. *Ibid.*, pp. 226-27.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 228. See also Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture: Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 98.
44. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 227. See also Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, p. 80.
45. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 230-31.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
47. *Ibid.*, pp. 231-32.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 232. See also Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, p. 185.
49. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 232. See also Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, p. 102.
50. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," pp. 233-34.
51. *Ibid.*, p. 271.
52. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 234. See also Almond and Verba, *Civic Culture*, p. 108.

53. Kap-Yun Lee, "Electoral Connection of an Authoritarian One-man Rule: Parties, Elections, and Electoral Systems in South Korea (1948-1991)," in Hong Yung Lee and Dal-Joong Chang, eds., *Political Authority*, pp. 16-17
54. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
55. Nam Young Lee, "Industrialization and the Korean Political Culture," p. 69.
56. Wonmo Dong, "Regional Cleavage in South Korean Politics," *Korea Observer* 26, 2 (Summer 1995), p. 2.
57. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-24.
58. *Ibid.*, pp. 6, 9-12. See also Sung Chul Yang, "South Korea's Top Bureaucratic Elites, 1948-1993: Their Recruitment and Model Characteristics," *Korea Journal* 34, 3 (Autumn 1994), pp. 1-15. See also Yeon Soo Cho, "Hapri jeok Yukwonja model kwa Hankuk eui Kukhwae Euiwon Seonkeo-yeochon yado, jiyek jui, jeongdang bonwi tpyo rul jungshim euro," in Hankuk Jeonchi Hukwae, ed., *Seonkeo wa Hankuk Jeongchi* (Seoul: Hankuk Jeongchi Hakhwae, 1992), pp. 80-86.
59. Dong, "Regional Cleavage," pp. 14-24, esp. 16.
60. Chosun Ilbo, December 20, 1997. Kim Dae-Jung received 92.3 percent of the votes cast in the North Cholla Province, 94.6 percent in the South Cholla Province, and 97.3 percent in the city of Kwangju. See *ibid.*
61. Dong, "Regional Cleavage," p. 16.
62. For a detailed analysis, see Sungjoo Han, *Failure of Democracy*, pp. 103-37.
63. For a detailed analysis, see Frank Langdon, *Politics in Japan* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1967), pp. 72-90.
64. Chong Lim Kim, "Potential for Democratic Change," p. 65
65. *Ibid.*
66. *Ibid.*, p. 67.