

Smart Talk
No. 46

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This product presents a policy-oriented summary of the Smart Talk.

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Comparing Democratization in South Korea and Taiwan

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On March 22, 2016, East Asia Institute invited Bruce Jacobs, professor emeritus at Monash University, to analyze the democratization of South Korea and Taiwan by looking at the historical similarities in the democratic processes of the two countries in order to better understand the development and processes of democracy in Asia. The following are some of the main points of the discussion.

Summary of the Seminar

Describing South Korea and Taiwan as the “Third Wave” of Asian democracy, Jacobs began the discussion by looking at similarities and differences in South Korea and Taiwan during the period from Japanese colonialism to democratization in the late 1980s. For example, while the Japanese empire established a strong police state and killed many people in both countries, Taiwan had a civilian governors-general and South Korea had only military governors-general. From this comparison, Jacobs extrapolated that Japanese colonialism triggered the momentum of democratization in South Korea and Taiwan by establishing patterns of administration and bureaucratic efficiency or enhancing national consciousness, to name a few.

Similarities and differences in South Korea and Taiwan continued after the World War II, according to Jacobs. He specifically focused on the Gwangju Uprising, otherwise known as May 18 Democratic Movement, and Kaohsiung Incident of 1979, two prominent mass movement for democracy in South Korea and Taiwan respectively. Once again, great similarities and differences could be noted. Both the Gwangju Uprising and the Kaohsiung Incident occurred at similar times (Gwangju Uprising in May 1980 and Kaohsiung Incident in December 1979) and acted as the key, if not catalyst, for eventual democratization. However, differences were

more noteworthy. Most prominently, Gwangju Uprising was more violently repressed, with the unofficial number of casualties exceeding 1,000, whereas in the Kaohsiung Incident, no one was killed and there were no permanent injuries. Secondly, only two out of twelve movement leaders in Gwangju Uprising entered the National Assembly while most of leaders in the Kaohsiung Incident became politically prominent after democratization. While reasons for such differences in the two mass democratic movements in these two countries were not discussed in depth, Jacobs noted that ability of subsequent leaders to compromise with the oppositions partly accounts for successful democratization.

This led back to a fundamental question: why compare democratization in South Korea and Taiwan? According to Jacobs, South Korea and Taiwan both have a democratic government, a presidential system in which there exists a prime minister for South Korea and premier for Taiwan, and unicameral legislature, in addition to sharing history of Japanese colonialism, post-World War II dictatorship, and democratization at similar times.

Jacobs concluded his presentation by suggesting several factors that helped South Korea and Taiwan during democratization. In addition to experience with Japanese colonialism, he listed their geopolitical positions, the cold war stalemate, some electoral experience under the Japanese and postwar dictatorships, American political pressure, and the fall of President Marcos in the Philippines as possible factors that influenced democratization in South Korea and Taiwan. Taking into account that South Korean and Taiwanese public sentiments towards Japan are different in both countries with Koreans displaying more hostility and distrust than the Taiwanese towards Japan, Jacobs noted the possibility that despite all these similarities between South Korea and

Taiwan, history of Japanese colonialism could have affected both countries differently.

Following the presentation, subsequent discussion focused on two topics: 1) actual impact or degree of influence of Japanese colonialism on democratization of South Korea and Taiwan and 2) Taiwanese domestic politics. On the first topic, discussants expressed concerns that, adding to the controversy surrounding the issue, it might be rather too simplistic to point out that the Japanese colonial rule necessarily contributed to the democratization of Korea and Taiwan, to which Jacobs certainly agreed with. Jacobs further explained that the strong Japanese bureaucratic rule awakened national consciousness in both countries as well as enhanced their economic, social and educational spheres in the post-war setting, thus limitedly facilitating democratic rule. That is by far the extent of the legacy of Japanese colonial rule in Taiwan and Korea, and as such, there is no direct implication of colonial rule to the development of democracies in both countries. Participants agreed that when it comes to colonialism, regardless of its traces of a relatively beneficial boost to democratizing elements, the end does not justify the means.

Touching upon the issue on democratic movements, the talks drifted slightly to the comparison of violence that occurred in Taiwan and Korea during the Kaohsiung Incident and Gwangju Uprising respectively. Jacobs remarked that it might be misleading to insinuate that Taiwan was more democratic from the fact that it experienced less casualties, as much as it is unfair to deduce that Korea significantly progressed further because of the transitional justice that followed the movement with the prosecution of former President Chun Doo-hwan.

Discussions for the second topic largely concentrated around presidential elections and the issue of ethnic identity in Taiwan. Considering the increasing identity preference by the public as Taiwanese, and not Chinese, one discussant was interested in the reason for Ma Ying-jeou's landslide victory in 2008. Jacobs elucidated that there are other factors at play,

such as the then unreliable policy of the Democratic Progressive Party, which was unsuccessful due to the failure of its "Taiwanese policy" and problem with corruption, thus making Ma's "We could do better than that" campaign resonate better among the people, though Ma fell short of the expectations in the executions of his policy. Learning from such failures, Tsai Ing-wen triumphed in this year's election. This begs a deeper inquiry on whether there are other determining factors related to the dynamics of Taiwanese elections. Analyzing the Kuomintang's current lack of acclaim from the younger generation whose voices are getting increasingly more powerful, Jacobs pointed out that distribution politics, as suggested by a discussant, might be one of the issues worth a closer look.

Reviewing the case of Taiwan and South Korea, participants concluded that paths towards democracy are intertwined with numerous factors contingent upon the specific historical experiences as well as the domestic political dynamics of each country, regardless the similarities of circumstances they share. ■

About the Speakers

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