

Democratic Backsliding and Resilience: The Korean Experience

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I. Introduction

Democratization was a global trend three decades ago. It began in southern Europe in the mid-1970s, passed through Latin America in the 1980s, and continued to many countries in Asia. The fall of communism led to the democratization of Eastern European countries. Democratization continued its march in the international community, such as in the Republic of South Africa, with a symbolic figure, Nelson Mandela. Samuel Huntington labeled it as the ‘third wave of democratization,’ and Francis Fukuyama dared to call it the ‘end of history,’ where the competition of political systems has ended.

However, we are witnessing signs of democratic backsliding around the world. The retreat of democracy is not limited to emerging democracies, such as Hungary, Turkey, Thailand, the Philippines, and Russia. The recent rise of Trumpism in the United States, the Brexit referendum in the United Kingdom, and the rise of far-right and populist parties in European countries suggest that democracy is never perfect and constantly challenged, while the importance of its resilience is ever more highlighted.

II. Democratization Process of Korea

Since democratization in 1987, Korea has consolidated democracy in a relatively stable and continuous manner. Before the democratization process, Korea was under an authoritarian regime for a long time. Although the previous system was undemocratic, it was not a complete departure from the liberal democracy. Elections were periodically held, and opposition parties were allowed to exist. Of course, the fairness of the election was often questioned, and the opposition party could never seize power. However, the elections were highly competitive. Even under an authoritarian regime, public dissatisfaction with power was expressed through elections, which gave a serious political warning to the ruling powers. Military juntas who came to power through a coup d’etat were aware of the fundamental weakness in their legitimacy and wanted to justify their regime through elections. For this reason, leaders of the opposition party believed in the possibility of a power change through elections as long as free and fair elections could be guaranteed.

Korea went through democratization under such circumstances. The establishment of procedural democracy is the key factor in Korea’s democratization. For instance, the ‘revision of the

constitution for direct presidential election’ was the most important agenda of democratization in Korea in 1987. Later, establishing the fairness of elections became quintessential to the process of democratic consolidation. However, the establishment of electoral democracy and the possibility of regime change resulted in a centripetal form of competition among major political leaders. This, in turn, lowered the degree of political instability in the early stage of democratization. In addition, political leaders competitively recruited new figures to win the elections, and many hardliners were displeased that the ‘compromises’ had to be made for democratic transition. Bringing new blood into institutional politics helped recruit new elites and prevent political polarization and fragmentation. The regionalist party structure and simple majority voting system that emerged along with democratization also limited the number of effective parties to three or four, which maintained a stable and moderate multiparty system. Indeed, a change of government took place, and now it has become a common phenomenon. Delegation of power through elections was established as ‘the only game in town.’

The early depoliticization of the military in the initial stages of democratization also played an essential role in consolidating democracy in Korea. Young-sam Kim, the second president after democratization, tried to exterminate the vestiges of authoritarianism to meet the high public expectations for the new president and bolster the democratic legitimacy by replacing military generals from the era of military authoritarianism with new figures. Those disadvantaged under the rule of a faction within the “New Military Regime” organized around Chun Doo-hwan welcomed such reforms and became loyal to the new system formed by democratization. Meanwhile, Korea achieved remarkable economic growth along with the consolidation of democracy, and economic inequality has yet to become a severe issue. Until the Asian financial crisis in 1997, most people considered themselves middle-class and believed in the possibility of social mobility.

In addition, just as democratization in 1987 was achieved through citizen participation, citizens’ role was crucial in the process of consolidating democracy. Citizens directly participated in politics to pressure institutional politics when the political system was deemed dysfunctional, or the political responsiveness was significantly reduced. The massive candlelight vigils in 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2016 are examples. Many citizens participated in these vigils, which sometimes lasted for an extended period. However, they did not become violent. Democracy was stably and smoothly consolidated in Korea with different factors combined.

III. Is South Korean Democracy Backsliding?

Recently, Korea has been witnessing signs of a crisis in democracy. Korean democracy is not ‘backsliding’ nor is it sliding into authoritarianism. However, it is worrying that the ‘quality of democracy’ has been jeopardized.

First of all, Korea encountered a problem related to procedural democracy, the core of the ‘87 system.’ During the 2012 presidential election, the National Intelligence Service mobilized cyberwarfare to rig the election. In the 2017 presidential election, Druking, an online blogger, and his accomplices developed a comment-rigging software program. Both cases posed a serious threat to the political system as they were intended to influence public opinion on elections. Moreover, after the 2020 National Assembly election, disputes related to the election’s fairness have continued. A series of controversies on the fairness of elections and possibilities of political intervention may hint that the foundation of a sound democracy has been undermined.

Controversy over the integrity of election processes is even more serious. It is also related to questions about the neutrality or independence of ‘judgment agencies’ such as the Board of Audit and Inspection, the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and the Election Commission. It is also concerning that the doubts about the neutrality or independence of the prosecution continue, while the judicial branch, whose principal value should be fairness and independence, is often the subject of political controversy.

There were cases or legislation that may infringe on the political freedom of citizens. Examples include the Civil Service Ethics Division during the Lee Myung-bak administration that took the lead in civil inspection and the May 18 Special Act and anti-North Korean flyer law passed under the Moon administration. The recent controversial amendments to the law on media arbitration are also examples of cases that may limit freedom of speech.

As partisan polarization becomes severe, negative phenomena concerning the core values of liberal democracy, such as pluralism, tolerances, and consideration, are appearing. In 2019, there was a social conflict over the appointment of Cho Kuk, Minister of Justice. The incident shows that Korean society has recently been divided into two groups, ideologically and factional. Political conflicts and different opinions are natural and expected components of a democratic society. However, the problem Korea faces these days is political polarization without compromises. Korean society, divided by regionalism immediately after democratization, is being tested by the different dimensions of ideology, generation, and social class. The complex divisions are not dispersed by several political parties. Instead, in Korea, the two major factions are overlappingly monopolized, further exacerbating the extreme confrontations. Radical and extreme opinions have a stronger influence in each political camp than rational and moderate opinions, which naturally escalates the conflict to a point where extremists of each camp justify it as a confrontation between good and evil. This binary perspective disables any possibilities of compromise or reconciliation. Political competition degenerates into good overpowering evil, and mutual understanding and respect become impossible.

The problem of political polarization is even more visible among online and social networks. In online platforms, discussions on public issues are limited to communications between like-minded people, creating a so-called filter bubble, which exacerbates political polarization. The filter bubble reinforces a political belief, instead of allowing a process of genuine communication and reaching a mutual agreement.

Unfortunately, institutional politics, which are supposed to resolve these social conflicts and ideological polarization, instead encourage adversary politics. Social issues lead to factional conflicts through institutional politics such as the National Assembly or political parties, which, in turn, fuels the ideological and factional polarization in civil society, creating a vicious cycle.

On the other hand, the concentration of power in the president and central government continues despite the 30 years of consolidating process after democratization. In addition, recently, the so-called ‘Blue House government,’ which supports centralized power on the presidential aides, has become more prominent. The ‘Blue House government’ greatly undermines the autonomy of each department or institution, and negatively affects the efficiency of government and continuity of policy execution. Also, despite local autonomy, local governments are still administratively and financially weak compared to the central government. In other words, Korea is still the ‘Republic of Seoul.’ These are the political ‘omen’ of Korean democracy. Despite the relatively stable

implementation and consolidation of democracy, Korea continues to encounter challenges of democracy.

However, it seems unjust to label Korea's situation as a 'collapse of democracy' or a 'fundamental retreat.' The essential values of democracy have not been damaged; instead, the executions of power are at fault. The 'signs of crisis' of democracy in Korea can be resiled and recovered by civil participation and the operation of the system.

IV. Challenges in Strengthening Democratic Resilience

A remarkable trait of the development of Korean democracy after democratization is that the democratic system itself was never seriously threatened. Korea has undergone a series of crises that could put a strain on the democratic system. The Asian financial crisis in 1997, the attempt to impeach President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, and the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye in 2017 brought about severe political and economic crises. However, they were resolved through the political system. During the 1997 Asian financial crisis, the first peaceful change of government between the ruling and opposition parties was achieved. Although the impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2004 was a serious political crisis, the 17th National Assembly election served as a referendum over the de facto impeachment, in which the ruling Uri Party obtained a majority of seats, politically settling the issue of the impeachment. The impeachment was rejected by the Constitutional Court. In 2016, the monopoly of state affairs and corruption in the Park Geun-hye administration were resolved through citizen's candlelight vigils and the response of the National Assembly and the Constitutional Court. Political crises were all eased through the participation and judgment of the public and the constitutional system.

Likewise, the current problems of 'signs of crisis' or 'declining quality of democracy' can provide opportunities to show the resilience of Korean democracy. Citizen's interest and participation in political phenomena and democracy are of utmost importance. Fair elections, the establishment of political accountability, and the popularization of regime change are also critical elements of institutional foundations concerning the resilience of democracy. From Korea's experience, at the core of democratic resilience lies the procedural establishment of democracy, such as fair and free elections and the possibility of regime change.

The current 'signs of crisis' present challenges that can improve Korea's democracy. First of all, party politics should be reformed to connect civil society and the state. It is important to recover the competitiveness of party politics that can break away from the bipartisan cartel structure based on regionalism. In elections or competitive political markets, it should be possible for new and competitive political forces to emerge, which will naturally lead to a more open and pluralistic political environment along with changes in the ecosystem of party politics.

The political system becomes unstable when dissatisfaction rises against the existing parties for only representing the interest of specific groups of people. Populism and extremist politics also benefit from this situation. Therefore, socially diverse interests must be expressed through party politics, and new demands and opinions should be reflected in institutional politics by introducing new political forces. However, under the current simple majority system, it is not easy to guarantee such diverse representations. Under the electoral system centered on the simple majority system combined with regionality, the possibility of the emergence of a new party that can challenge the

vested interest of the two major parties is extremely low. While being protected by the institutional loophole, each mega political party binds its supporters through polarization, which results in intensified social conflicts. Therefore, an electoral system with high proportionality is demanded. Institutional changes should be made in the form of proper implementation of the principle of proportionality, instead of deceptive compromises, such as the so-called ‘quasi-interlocking proportional representation system’ made before the 21st National Assembly election. During the process, representative nature should not be biased, regardless of class, gender, status, educational background, occupation, and affiliation.

At the same time, it is crucial to institutionally strengthen the role of judges who can monitor power. The independence and neutrality of the judicial branch, as well as administrative bodies such as the National Election Commission and the Board of Audit and Inspection, are very important. Controversies over the autonomy of independence of institutions, including the judicial branch, are relevant to the president’s status and the concentration of power in the president. Therefore, in the long run, through the process of a constitutional amendment, the role of the president must return to the position of head of administration. Also, as the revival of the judge recommendation meeting in the Supreme Court, it is necessary to prepare an institutional improvement plan that enables each institution to be independent of power. It is also necessary to dismantle the presidential system, which often verges on being ‘imperial.’ It is also important to realize decentralization, which boldly transfers administrative and financial powers concentrated in the central administrative departments and Seoul to local governments. The core task of Korean society during democratization was limited to establishing procedural democracy. This goal has now largely been achieved. After more than 30 years after democratization, efforts are now needed to revise the constitution to build a new national governance system from a future-oriented perspective.

However, the most critical factor in safeguarding and maintaining the values of democracy is the role of a conscious citizen. Power to monitor power and the operation of political institutions and, if necessary, restore democracy through active participation originate from citizens. Citizen education that enlightens people to learn the values of democracy and the importance of protecting it is significant to democratic resilience. Also, another point about expanding the scope of representation and inclusiveness is that the composition of party elite selection should be expanded. It should not discriminate against candidates based on their class, gender, status, educational background, occupation, affiliation, and many other aspects.

In this regard, the importance of tolerance and coexistence needs to be emphasized in civil education. Citizens should be informed that disagreement and diversity, rather than homogeneity and unity, are natural, and the consensus should be ‘achieved’ through compromises and concessions between different people. The pluralistic value of ‘agree to disagree,’ which is the basis of the liberal democracy, should be socially internalized. In fact, during the development of liberal democracy in Korea, the emphasis has been on democracy rather than freedom. Democracy has always been a core value in Korean politics since the April 19 Revolution in 1960. Even under the oppressive regime, the desire for democratization continues to persist. In contrast, liberal values have not yet been discussed much in Korean society. Liberal values, such as individual freedom, acceptance of differences, tolerance, and solicitude, and respect for diversity were relatively neglected. It is impossible to achieve a society of harmony and reconciliation through institutional

politics alone. Citizens should be the active agents who directly create such values. The foundation for the restoration of democracy is the consciousness of citizens to protect these values. ■

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The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

This program was funded in part by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED).

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979-11-6617-260-1 95300 Date of Issue: November 1, 2021

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