

The Long March Toward Democracy: Assessment of the Political Modernization in the Republic of Korea

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Introduction

The Republic of Korea (popularly known as South Korea, hereafter only Korea) has successfully managed to modernize its basically agricultural economy to become one of the most advanced industrial economies within three decades.¹ Unlike this impressive economic development, however, Korea experienced numerous political crisis. Political development was even deliberately hindered for the sake of economic advancement. Mainly due to this unbalance, Korea experienced political radicalism unprecedented in its history. Between 1948 and 1987 Korea had five republics, nine constitutional revisions, two military coups, and twelve declarations of martial law, which were usually followed by the dissolution of the National Assembly and proscription of political parties. The Korean War (1950-53) and the 1980 Kwangju Uprising were traumatic experiences in addition to the thousands of street demonstrations mostly by students.

As the world began to focus on the Summer Olympic Games scheduled for 1988 in Seoul, in early 1987 a broad spectrum of Koreans joined the students in the streets demanding restoration of democracy and an end to military rule. After months of escalation and confrontation between riot police and students, the government finally gave in to the people's demands, and the then ruling party's heir-designate Roh Tae-Woo initiated a bold political reform. A new constitution was adopted in October and direct presidential election took place in December 1987.

1 About industrialization of Korea, see, for example, Alice H. Amsden, *Asia's Next Giant: South Korea and Late Industrialization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

1988 became a very special year for Korea, because a new chapter in its modern political history began by starting the third attempt of political modernization after a peaceful democratic transition and by hosting the 24th Summer Olympics showing the world its economic achievements of the last 30 years. In spite of a few setbacks, full democracy has taken firm root and a major transformation of the Korean political system including the decentralization of power has taken place over the last five years.

This paper intends to analyse the Korean experiences in democratization. It will focus on the process of political transformation which is taking place and will summarize some of the lessons learned in historical perspective.

Brief Historical Background: the Long March

The Republic of Korea was established in August 1948 during the Cold War era in the US-occupation-zone on the Korean peninsula. In this traditionally "hermit kingdom" with strong nationalism² the US military government established a democratic political system. This was the first time democracy, an alien concept, was introduced in Korea with a constitution similar to the Weimar Republic's.³ The first president of the republic, Dr. Rhee Syng-Man, was elected by the National Assembly in 1948. After some losses of his Liberal Party in National Assembly elections in 1950, he declared martial law and changed the constitution to elect the president by direct vote. After securing his power he became a dictator. At that time the Korean public was not conscious about democracy which existed only on paper but suffered from the Korean War. Due to the division of the country the First Republic failed. In addition, due to 35 years of Japanese occupation at the beginning of the republic only about 20% of the population had some kind of formal education. In spite of economic difficulties, the government invested much in education, and the literacy rate increased rapidly to about 80% by 1960. Paradoxically, it were the students who led the people into the first successful democratic revolution in Korea's history: President Rhee was

2 About Korean nationalism, see Cha Ki-pyok, "Nationalism in Korea", *Korean Social Science Journal*, Volume 14, 1988, p. 7-19; Chong-Sik Lee, *The Politics of Korean Nationalism*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1963.

3 A German scholar, Prof. Dr. Ernst Fraenkel, then adviser to the president has written the draft of the constitution.

ousted from office by a student uprising in April 1960; he later died in exile on Hawaii.

On July 15, 1960, an amendment to the constitution was adopted by the incumbent assembly providing for a parliamentary-cabinet type political system similar to the British. The power of the president was to be symbolic or ceremonial, while the executive power was vested in the cabinet, headed by a prime minister. The newly elected National Assembly dominated by the Democratic Party elected Yun Bo-Sun for President of the Second Republic, and he was sworn in on August 15, 1960. President Yun nominated Dr. Chang Myun for prime minister and he was approved by the National Assembly. Prime Minister Chang restored the democratic institutions and began the second experiment with democracy in Korea. This time the local autonomy system was implemented: Local government was reorganized and many of its functions enlarged in addition to direct participation of citizens in local politics. There were, however, new political crisis regarding the prosecution of former politicians. Nevertheless, a democratic process had started and progressed with difficulties due to chronic economic problems. It was a shock to many Koreans when a first-ever military coup took place on May 16, 1961 and the democratic government which had been in power less than a year was ousted.

The leader of the military coup, General Park Chung-Hee, dissolved the parliament and all democratic institutions including local assemblies and gradually established an authoritarian unitary state system with a strong centralized administration. He argued that Korea could not afford democracy and should concentrate only on economic development. He forced economic modernization through export-drive and did not allow any political development. The authoritarian military regime under Park was challenged by never-ending protests from students and intellectuals which were treated very harshly. Many of them were put into prison or even lost their lives in the numerous attempts to restore democracy. In 1971 President Park Chung-Hee almost lost the presidential election to the young unknown contender Kim Dae-Jung. In 1972 he declared martial law and promulgated the Yushin (Revitalizing Reform) Constitution with an indirect election of the president and no limit on terms of office. From then on he ruled the country with emergency decrees and did not allow any criticism of himself or his government.⁴

4 For a good analysis of the political development during the Park Regime, see, Han Sung-Joo, *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea*. Berkeley: University of Califor-

President Park Chung-Hee was assassinated by the head of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Jae-Kyu, on October 26, 1979. Prime Minister Choi Gyu-Ha, sworn in as acting president according to the constitution, was elected the tenth president on December 6, 1979. This ended the long military dictatorship, and a new chance for democratic transition seemed possible. But after a few months of transition, on December 12, 1979 General Chun Doo-Hwan took over power through a new military coup. He was even harsher than his predecessor and cracked down on any opposition to his military rule. This escalated to a popular uprising in Kwangju in May 1980 where many hundreds of people were killed by troops. General Chun Doo-Hwan was elected president of the Fifth Republic on September 1, 1980, through rubber-stamp hand-picked members of the National Conference for Unification, which Park had created. President Chun later amended the constitution and consolidated his power by rounding up thousands of political opponents. His family members were involved in unprecedented corruption scandals in Korea. Opposition to President Chun Doo-Hwan became no longer limited to students and intellectuals. He was not even accepted by some military leaders.

President Chun Doo-Hwan also did not allow any political development and refused even to talk with opposition leaders. The main opposition leader Kim Dae-Jung, who had been sentenced to death in 1980 and was allowed to leave the country for medical treatment due to external pressure, returned early 1985 to Korea from his exile in the US. The opposition movement against President Chun increased dramatically, demanding restoration of democracy and lifting of martial law. The New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) was organized just before the parliamentary election in February 1985, gained 29% of the votes and developed into a leading opposition party.⁵ Political opposition was now coordinated and institutionalized by the NKDP and spread over the whole country.

The debate about a new constitution began in February 1986 when the NKDP and its fraternal Council for the Promotion of Democracy launched a nationwide campaign to collect 10 million signatures. Presi-

nia Press, 1975; Kim Yong-Ho, "Park Chung-Hee eui Minjujuikwan", *Hankook Nondan*, No. 26, October 1990, p. 110-116.

5 Eun Sung Chung, "Transition to Democracy in South Korea", *Asian Profile*, Volume 17, No. 1, February 1989, p. 28-29; see also Robert E. Bedeski, "State Reform and Democracy in South Korea", *The Journal of East Asian Affairs*, Volume 6, No. 1, Winter/Spring 1992, p. 153.

dent Chun Doo-Hwan and political party leaders met and agreed to revise the constitution before Chun's single seven year term expired in February 1988. Drafts were prepared by the ruling and opposition parties. The National Assembly established the Special Constitution Revision Committee. Rivalry and power struggle among opposition leaders emerged and the NKDP collapsed. Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung created the Reunification Democratic Party (RDP). Unexpectedly, President Chun Doo-Hwan declared on April 13, 1987 that the yearlong debate about constitutional reform should be banned until after the 1988 Olympics.⁶ Anti-government demonstrations erupted across the country and became more violent. To make things worse, on June 10, 1987, the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) designated President Chun's close associate General Roh Tae-Woo as his successor. This again triggered numerous violent civil disturbances across the country which threatened the 1988 Olympics.

As protests against President Chun by students who were supported by a growing and well-educated middle class, that had developed a keen political consciousness, were paramounting, Roh Tae-Woo announced that direct election of the president would be restored. He also pledged for a fundamental transformation of the political system. His reform platform was declared on June 29, 1987 and is now known as the Declaration of Democratic Reforms:

1. Revise the Constitution, through consensus between the governing party and the opposition, in order to adopt, among other things, a direct presidential election system favored by the public so that there could be a peaceful change of government in February 1988, when the term of the incumbent President was to end.
2. Revise without delay the Presidential Election Law to ensure fair management of elections.
3. Release those imprisoned or detained for political dissent and restore civil rights.
4. Institutionalize respect for human dignity and the protection of basic rights.
5. Promote freedom of the press by abolishing all manner of overt and covert censorship.

6 See *The Christian Science Monitor*, June 29, 1987, p. 28 and Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 32.

6. Guarantee private initiative and self-regulation and reinstate local autonomy to build a vibrant democratic society.
7. Create a political climate conducive to dialogue and compromise and guarantee sound political party activities.
8. Carry out bold ethical reforms to build a clean and honest society.⁷

Roh's landmark declaration surprised supporters and opponents alike. These reform issues had actually been demanded repeatedly by the opposition for many years, and now they were fully endorsed by Roh Tae-Woo for his candidacy by promising to end authoritarian rule and to set out on the road to full democracy. It was risky for Roh Tae-Woo but he attempted to end the long-standing unrest and to transform the authoritarian government structure into a more democratic one. Roh Tae-Woo even threatened to resign as a candidate if President Chun Doo-Hwan refused his recommendations. President Chun accepted this proposal and among other measures restored civil as well as political rights to Kim Dae-Jung. Many political prisoners were released and political reform started in Korea. The Declaration was accepted by the opposition and public unrest finally ended in June 1987. The transition to democracy was effected positively by the consensus on constitutional reform between the ruling party and the opposition.

Negotiations between these two camps for a new constitution continued until it was adopted in the National Assembly on October 12, 1987 and became effective by a popular referendum on October 28, 1987. In the process, many lessons from other countries' experiences in transition to democracy were taken into consideration.⁸ Representatives of the two sides negotiated that the president should be elected directly by popular vote, serve a single five-year term and have no power to dissolve the National Assembly.⁹ The three major candidates knew that any one of them would have difficulties in getting a majority of the votes, so they agreed on a single plurality. This constitution was a historical compromise of the ruling and the opposition parties. The new constitution restored much of the democratic institutions and added a few more

7 For the full text of the Declaration, see Roh Tae-Woo, *Korea in the Pacific Century*. New York: University Press of America, 1992, p. 293-297; Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 145-148.

8 The experiences of the Philippines and some South American countries were taken into serious consideration.

9 See *The Christian Science Monitor*, September 7, 1987, p. 3.

safeguards to democracy. The Constitution Court was created to protect the constitution and human rights, and is responsible for impeachment and other crucial issues. Another important addition is the statement that the military should stay out of politics and should be charged only with national defense.¹⁰ The constitution also guarantees local autonomy that was to be implemented soon by law.

Presidential Election 1987 and Peaceful Transition

Under the new constitution, the president was to be elected directly by popular vote in December 1987. The candidate of the ruling party, Roh Tae-Woo, tried to gain support by promising democratic reforms and distancing himself from President Chun Doo-Hwan. Kim Dae-Jung who was the symbol of opposition against the Presidents Park and Chun became an adviser to the Reunification Democratic Party (RDP) but actually shared power within the party with its president Kim Young-Sam. The two Kims, however, could not agree on a single candidate for the presidency and rivalry intensified. Each Kim saw himself as the hero of Korea's democracy. After the formal adoption of the new constitution, Kim Dae-Jung formed a new party, the Party for Peace and Democracy (PPD) and became its presidential candidate. Until election day many opposition supporters tried to convince the two rivaling opposition leaders, Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Young-Sam, to agree on a single candidacy. It was obvious that if both Kims ran, they would be out for nothing except personal ambition.¹¹ Kim Jong-Pil, former prime minister under Park, also decided to run supported by his New Democratic Republican Party (NDRP). The three opposition parties called for an end to decades of military rule.

The direct popular presidential election, the first in 16 years, finally took place on December 16, 1987 with four candidates and participation of over 90% of the electorate. Roh Tae-Woo, the ruling DJP candidate, was elected with 36.6% of the votes. Kim Young-Sam was second with 28% while Kim Dae-Jung came in third with 27% of the votes.¹² Al-

10 See Constitution of Oct. 1987, Article 5.

11 See *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 17, 1987, p. 11.

12 See Han Sung-Joo, "South Korea in 1987: The Politics of Democratization", *Asian Survey*, Volume 28, No. 1, January 1988, p. 57; For a detailed analysis of the election, see Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 81-91. It was also rumored that the ruling party

though the losers charged the government with unfair election campaigning and fraud, it was evident that the main reason for the defeat was the divided opposition. The two Kims together had received more than 55% of the votes. Needless to say, Roh Tae-Woo benefited from the split within the opposition and from a swing to his side by middle-class voters fearful of radical changes which could lead to instability.

Although some were relieved that there would be no radical changes in government, many people who had fought for the removal of military legacy from politics were disappointed. Some members of the opposition left their parties by blaming the two Kims for losing "the best chance in Korea's 5000-year history to achieve democratization by failing to field a single presidential candidate."¹³ It was the first setback in this new democratic process in Korea and a great disappointment to the people who wanted to see a civilian government. On the other hand, it was the continuation of political reform promised by Roh himself.

Roh Tae-Woo was inaugurated as President of the Sixth Republic on February 25, 1988 through the first peaceful transfer of power. In his inaugural speech Roh said, "The day when freedom and human rights could be slighted in the name of economic growth and national security has ended."¹⁴

The Emergence of the Ruling Minority Party

Although Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Young-Sam had to face pressure to resign from their parties, they did not give in, and tried to merge the two opposition parties for the coming parliamentary election. This attempt again failed because of the leadership question. They both decided to continue their campaign against the ruling party separately. This time they concentrated on political issues, such as corruption scandals and economic problems, rather than on personalities. Negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties began on the National Assembly Members Election Act; and the ruling DJP agreed to opposition demands on single candidacy for each district.

financed the opposition parties to make sure that the two Kims stayed in the race. *ibid.*, p. 73.

13 Cited in Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 95.

14 Korean Overseas Information Service, Seoul, July 1988; Roh Tae-Woo, *Korea in the Pacific Century*. New York: University Press of America, 1992, p. 299.

The result of the parliamentary elections held on April 26, 1988 was a surprise for the ruling as well as the opposition parties. It was one of the freest elections in Korea and 75.8% of the voters cast their ballots. The ruling party DJP failed to secure a majority, winning only 125 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly. Kim Dae-Jung's PPD won 71 seats and became the largest opposition party. Kim Young-Sam's RDP and Kim Jong-Pil's NDRP secured 60 and 35 seats respectively.¹⁵ Eight independents were also elected. The three opposition parties had secured a good majority of the parliamentary seats and could weaken the president's ability to enforce his own policy agenda.

The National Assembly dominated by the opposition used its investigative powers to expose and clear wrongdoings and scandals of the previous regime. The Fifth Republic was accused of irregularities in 44 major cases. These investigations were, for the first time, televised nationwide and were an embarrassment to many former high government officials, military leaders and top businessmen. Former President Chun Doo-Hwan appeared on TV on November 23, 1988, surrendering all his wealth to the state and apologizing for the wrongdoings under his rule. He and his wife went on self-imposed exile to a remote Buddhist temple near Mt. Sorak. However, his apology was not enough for the opposition parties in the parliament. They demanded Chun's appearance as a witness in the Kwangju hearings in the National Assembly.

The opposition majority blocked most of the government's initiatives. As a result, political development stagnated with the power struggle between the president and the parliament. This continued throughout 1989 and a grand compromise was announced on December 15, 1989 between President Roh and the three Kims to move the political process forward in the National Assembly: Former President Chun should appear before parliament and the debate about the Fifth Republic would be ended. Chun showed up on December 31, 1989 to answer some of the 123 questions submitted to him in advance regarding the alleged wrongdoings during his rule. But his historical appearance televised nationwide did not satisfy all of the opposition party members, on the contrary, they demanded prosecution of Chun and other leaders of the Fifth Republic.

15 For a detailed analysis of the election, see Kim Hong-Nak, "The 1988 Parliamentary Election in South Korea", *Asian Survey*, Volume 39, No. 5, May 1989, p. 480-495; Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 93-106.

This escalated further the political power struggle between the ruling and opposition parties, thus the domestic crisis continued.

Merger of Two Opposition Parties with the Ruling Party

The political reform came almost to a standstill by the end of 1989 due to the conflict between the president and the parliament over the issues of the previous regime. On January 23, 1990 President Roh announced the merge of his ruling party with two opposition parties (Kim Yong-Sam's RDP and Kim Jong Pil's NDRP) creating a new conservative Democratic Liberal Party (DLP).¹⁶ The three leaders claimed that they had agreed on the merge "to realize the historic tasks of democratic development and national unity."¹⁷ They justified the move as necessary to overcome a parliamentary deadlock and to save the nation from the instability of divided government. This move to create a ruling majority in the parliament, similar to the Japanese Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), was mainly the government's attempt to end the confrontation in the National Assembly and to secure a good majority to carry out government policies. Opinions were divided among the Korean public regarding the merge. Some criticized it as an attempt of a novel kind of authoritarianism or even a betrayal of the popular electorate who voted for the opposition in the last election. But others saw positive aspects in the merge because there would be a stable majority which could steer the country along a consistent path to solve many urgent economic and political problems. The new governing DLP held now a good two thirds of the seats in parliament and could easily control the National Assembly. Discussions about amending the constitution replacing the presidential system by a cabinet system of government started. The opposition party was very suspicious of the intention and was strongly against any change of the constitution.

Kim Dae-Jung's PPD remained the only opposition party in parliament, but was too weak to pressure the governing party. Kim Dae-Jung launched a public campaign to denounce the merger and called it a political coup. The DLP passed many bills through the National Assembly in-

16 For a detailed account on the merger, see *Korea Annual 1990*. Seoul: Yonhap News Agency, 1990, p. 91-96.

17 Cited in Han Sung-Joo, "Korea's Experiment with Democracy", *Asian Update*, February, 1991, p. 9.

spite of protests and absence of the opposition party, leading to an 'en masse' resignation of opposition members, which was not accepted by the speaker of the parliament. Kim Dae-Jung and 30 other members went on a hunger strike demanding among others;

- not to amend the constitution replacing the presidential system by a cabinet system of government;
- a speedy implementation of local autonomy.¹⁸

The ruling party finally gave in and promised not to amend the constitution to change the political system and agreed to expedite the time schedule for local elections. Violent student demonstrations continued as in previous regimes. Labor disputes also increased and anti-government demonstrations were staged in many large cities.

Amidst of political challenges within, the government concentrated more on foreign policy and inter-Korean relations successfully. It intensified the 'Nordpolitik' and normalized relations with communist countries in East Europe and started a direct dialog with North Korea.¹⁹ President Roh Tae-Woo suggested a grand South-North exchange of people in July 1990. The peaceful German unification inspired a new hope for Korean reunification. Direct trade with the communist North was allowed for the first time since the division and direct exchanges of goods were encouraged. The first meeting of the prime ministers of the two Koreas took place in September 1990 in Seoul. Further contacts on high political level continued. This change in inter-Korean relations somewhat positively influenced the domestic crisis in Korea, but protest against the government continued.

Decentralization Through Local Autonomy, 1991

Although local autonomy was guaranteed from the First Republic onwards, it was never implemented fully and often misused for political purposes by the presidents. The opposition's demand to implement genuine local autonomy was basically for two reasons: To speed

18 Young Whan Kihl, "South Korea in 1990: Diplomatic Activism and Partisan Quagmire", *Asian Survey*, Volume 31, No. 1, January 1991, p. 67.

19 For a discussion of inter-Korean relations, see for example, Mark B. M. Suh, "Normalisierungs- und Vereinigungsperspektiven in Korea", *Aussenpolitik*, Volume 43, No. 3, 1992, p. 256-266.

democratic transition with full participation of citizens in the process and to solve the uneven development of the regions resulting from over-centralized politics of the past. Furthermore, it was generally believed that local autonomy would help in increasing administrative efficiency in modern Korean society.

The reintroduction of a local autonomy system was promised by the presidential candidate of the governing party, Roh Tae-Woo, in 1987 and local autonomy was incorporated in the new constitution as a key to guaranteeing "maximum freedom and self-regulation in all sectors" of national life.²⁰ The implementation was delayed due to the political crisis in parliament. A solution was finally found on December 31, 1990 with the adoption of the Local Assemblymen Election Law, setting the date for the first local election in March 1991. It was a compromise between the opposition and the ruling party that local autonomy would be implemented on a phased basis. In the first stage, the lowest local assemblies were to be established followed by larger city and provincial assemblies. The final stage would be the direct election of heads of local administrations.

The first local assembly elections took place on March 26, 1991 without direct participation of the major political parties, mainly not to politicize the election because of unpopular sentiments about politics in general at that time due to recent scandals. Some 4304 local assembly members were elected. Election campaign was limited to cut expenses and each candidate was allowed to speak only for 20 minutes each in two campaign rallies. The turnout of voters was low with 55% due to the lack of experiences and to the low confidence in politics at the time because of new scandals.²¹

The second level election was held on June 20, 1991 with direct participation of the major political parties.²² It was like a national election with lively competition among parties. The result was surprising because

20 Actual preparation for introduction of local autonomy started in 1984. The Ministry of Home Affairs prepared for the Local Autonomy Law and trained high civil servants in Germany for local autonomy. The Korean Local Autonomy system is similar to the Southern German States, Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg. The Local Autonomy Law was adopted on April 6, 1988 but was amended later on December 31, 1990 changing the date for elections. For the full text of the law, see Ji Byung-Moon, *Hankook Jibangjachieui Ihae*. Seoul: Bulbit, 1991, p. 229-277.

21 For a detailed analysis of the first local election, see Park Sang-Jeung (ed.), *Jibang-jachijewa Hankooksahwe Minjubyunhyuk*. Seoul: Minjungsa, 1991, p. 206-243.

22 For a more detailed analysis of the local elections, see *Korea Annual 1991*. Seoul: Yonhap News Agency, 1991, p. 107-110.

in provincial assemblies with 65% of seats the ruling party gained the majority except in the Cholla Province where the opposition leader Kim Dae-Jung is popular. The ruling DLP saw this as a sign of acceptance of the merger and the establishment of a political system similar to Japan. A new feature in the elections was the strong showing of independent candidates which indicated public distrust in established parties. The turnout was only 58.9%; slightly higher than the first lower level assembly elections. This low participation in local elections showed that many people either considered the role of the local assembly lightly or did not understand their role well enough to be willing to vote.

In spite of the partial implementation of just two of three elections, the reintroduction of local autonomy was a turning point in the history of Korean politics. After 30 years, local assemblies were established again to check and balance local administration. This started a new stage of democratization in Korea. To increase the financial self-sufficiency of local government bodies new taxes were created as an additional source of revenue for them, along with a system of providing grant-in-aid from the central government. Much of the authority and power of the national government was also transferred to local governments. Local administration is to control local affairs independently.

Since four major elections were to be held in 1992, President Roh and the ruling DLP decided to postpone the third phase of the local elections until 1995, that is, elections for administrative heads of county and municipal governments, and 14 provincial governors and majors of special cities. This issue was the major problem between the ruling and opposition party before the presidential election and is pending the final verdict of the Constitutional Court. The postponed third phase elections, however, are likely to be held early 1994.

The decentralization process through implementation of local autonomy is the key factor in the Korean way to political modernization. The idea of local self-government which means among others financial self-reliance and political self-determination can be realized only through cooperation with the central government. The regional disparity in economic strength is still a major danger and challenge to local autonomy in Korea. The success or failure of local autonomy is greatly dependant on central government policy and political consciousness of local citizens. As a result of local autonomy, however, the central government can no longer dictate its decision to local administration. This is in some cases delaying or hindering implementation of long-standing decisions, i.e. most of the construction plans for nuclear power stations, waste disposal

or sewage treatment plants are being blocked by local assemblies. In the final analysis, the local autonomy has many advantages and will speed up democratic development, such as checking and balancing central government, increasing participation of citizens, educating the public, training local leaders, as well as providing more equitable public services. Making compromises for the general purpose against local interest needs to be learned through experiences.

Parliamentary and Presidential Elections, 1992

In the latter half of 1991 anti-regime movements noticeably decreased and opposition forces decided to form a grand alliance, the National Federation for Democracy and National Unification. The political parties concentrated on the upcoming parliamentary elections. It was agreed that they were to be held in the first half of 1992. In September 1991 Kim Dae-Jung merged his PPD party with the small Democratic Party (DP), composed of former Kim Young-Sam followers who had split with him over his decision to merge with the ruling DJP. Kim Dae-Jung's intention was to broaden his support in all provinces.

The second free parliamentary elections since the restoration of democracy were held on March 24, 1992. The result was very surprising, especially for the ruling party and for Kim Dae-Jung. The DLP lost its majority and won only 149 seats in the 299 member National Assembly. The major opposition Democratic Party and the newly established Unification National Party (UNP later renamed as United People's Party UPP) made a strong showing, winning 97 and 31 seats respectively.²³ Many political observers cite the failure of the government's economic policy and strenuous feuding within the DLP since its inauguration in 1990 as main reasons for the defeat. It was definitely a sign of political maturity in Korea and a clear rejection of the Japanese type of political structure which the ruling elites had created and hoped for. This boosted a new hope for the DP in the upcoming presidential election. The UNP founder, business-tycoon Chung Joo-Young, also was surprised by the more than expected success and decided to run for presidency.

The presidential election held on December 18, 1992 was a major test to Korea's democratic transition. This time no former military leader tried to be elected, and political parties played a more significant role in

23 For the detailed result of the election, see *Korea Newsreview*, March 28, 1992, p.4-5.

political decision-making process than in the past. Each party selected their candidate through a more democratic procedure than before. The ruling party had even two candidates and through secret ballot at the party convention in May 1992 Kim Young-Sam was elected as candidate.²⁴ The two opposition parties elected their party candidate for the presidential election: Kim Dae-Jung for the DP and Chung Joo-Young for the UNP. The campaign issues concentrated mainly on economic and social problems, but unlike 1987 democracy was not an issue this time. Kim Young-Sam tried to convince voters by promising continuity and stability. He disagreed with his opponents mainly on the pace at which reforms should take place, arguing that a gradual change is preferable. Kim Dae-Jung appealed to young and under-privileged people for a radical change in the government. He tried to be radical as well as conservative to broaden his supporters nation-wide. Chung Ju-Young was for a change in business-government relations and led a most provocative campaign attacking the government and the other candidates. One of the proofs of President Roh's bid for a fair election was the new rule that military ballots must be cast at polling stations set up outside their barracks and encampments. He also appointed a new prime minister and a neutral cabinet on the eve of the election. Therefore, for the first time, the military and the government stayed out of the race.

On the election day 81.9% of voters turned out, much lower than in the 1987 election, and 42% of them voted for Kim Young-Sam, more than most observers had expected. Kim Dae-Jung received about 34% and Chung Ju-Young drew only about 16% of the total votes cast. Most Koreans called the election the most peaceful, fair and clean in the nation's turbulent post-war history. There were no incidents that could have led to charges of fraud or violent disturbances. Unlike previous times, the losers accepted the result and congratulated the winner. Soon after the result was known, Kim Dae-Jung conceded gracefully that he had been defeated fairly and decided to retire from politics. Although he lost the election for the third time, he won new respect for his democratic attitude. Later Chung Ju-Young also decided to quit and leave politics to politicians.

This harmonious transition was possible through the skillful balancing act of President Roh Tae-Woo. He turned out to be a sincere democrat and carried out the succession of reform he had promised in 1987. His contribution to the Korean political modernization should not be un-

24 See *Korea Newsreview*, May 23, 1992, p.4.

derestimated.²⁵ Equally important is the role of Kim Dae-Jung. He was the symbol of democratic opposition during the military rule and played a significant role in safeguarding the reform especially during the last five years. Both men have contributed much to bringing about political modernization in Korea.

The new civilian President Kim Young-Sam, inaugurated on February 25, 1993, will have only limited power for five years to rule the country and to continue the reform started by Roh Tae-Woo. As a former dissident, he can sweep out the remnants and legacy of the long authoritarian rule including the national security law and regionalism. His major task, however, will be how to keep the economy growing amidst many new problems. He, furthermore, has to deal with the delicate reunification issue with the economically ruined totalitarian regime in North Korea. Being aware of these challenges and risks, people voted for continuity and stability, which is a gradual and moderately paced democratization.

Conclusion

Representative democracy with free elections was introduced in 1948 to Korea by the US, but due to the political circumstances at that time and the division of the country, it failed to take root. The second attempt to democracy, which was initiated in 1960 after student revolts had toppled a dictator, failed because of a military coup in 1961. The long military dictatorship was finally ended 1987 as a result of internal and external pressures. This third attempt for democracy in Korea found a better soil to develop. Due to their economic success and high standard of education, people are more aware of their rights and democratic liberal values. Although there were some setbacks in the beginning and the process is still in a maturation progress, democracy has taken deep root in Korean society and is firmly established in the political system.

Democratic transition includes changes in political behavior as well as institutional reform. Korea has completed most of its structural and legal reforms which started in 1987. The legislature is upgraded to a more equal status with the executive branch in the new system. Repressive laws

25 Frank Gibney's excellent book, *Korea's Quiet Revolution: From Garrison State to Democracy*. New York: Walter and Company, 1992, deals extensively with Roh's contribution to Democracy, see especially p. 1-12 and 90-112.

have been revised and the opposition party is a factor in legislation and in checking the work of the government. Without doubt, citizens enjoy far greater civil and political liberty than ever. Besides the political changes from authoritarian rule to a democratically elected government, many socio-political changes occurred. The consciousness and expectations of the people underwent a rapid transformation. Newspapers and magazines were freed from censorship and many new ones popped up. Korea now has more than 87 daily newspapers (only 28 in 1987) and about 3488 (1404 in 1987) magazines, which circulate freely. The long-suppressed labor unions began to organize to demand more wages and improved working conditions for employees. A particularly notable development has been the decrease in violent student demonstrations which are losing public support. After all, democratization is a gradual step-by-step process and not a radical one.

The Korean experiences indicate clearly that democracy requires certain preconditions. There should be a good majority of citizens being politically conscious, well-educated, involved, active and informed. Education has been at the heart of Korea's growth by training and supplying the manpower needed for rapid industrial and economic expansion. This in turn increased the educational standard and democratic consciousness. Equally important is an organized opposition as a counter-weight to the state power. In Korea the existence of a strong, well-organized and autonomous opposition party was and still is a crucial factor in political modernization. Furthermore, a decentralized power structure with checks and balances, so that nobody can misuse power for his own political purpose, is very important to safe-guard democratic institutions. In addition, one of the advantages of local autonomy is the citizen's participation in local politics and in the decision-making process. In modern societies it is crucial to get consensus and support of the people for any significant decision. Needless to say, direct participation of citizens is indispensable for democracy. This is decentralization of power, not just administrative deconcentration.

In summary, a silent (r)evolution has taken place in Korea over the last five years and transformed the political system: Transition from an authoritarian military regime to a liberal democratic one was realized. It was a coup from the top under pressure from the people and also learning and adjustment capabilities of parts of the elite. Although there are still some shortcomings, in the long run a Korean form of democracy adapted to Korean society will emerge. Korean culture and tradition is deeply rooted in Confucianism, an ethic that emphasizes consensus over

conflict, i.e. community hierarchies and social order over individual freedom of expression and self-determination. Due to the rapidly changing social environment, traditional cultural values such as blind obedience to superiors, hierarchical interpersonal relationships and loyalty, are slowly changing.²⁶ When the peaceful democratic reform is fully completed, Korea's political development will match its spectacular economic and social development. Then Korea will prove that modernization of a backward political system is possible without violent revolution. Korean experience also indicates that economic and political development can be pursued simultaneously, albeit somewhat slower. Furthermore, it shows that achieving a successful democratization is more difficult than the transition to democracy from an authoritarian regime.

26 Seo Kwang-Cho, *Hankookkeui Jayuminjuhwa Hyundaewha*, Seoul: Shin Won Publishing Co., 1990, p. 356-357; Han Seung-Cho, *Hankook Jungchi Onul kwa Naeil*, Seoul: Il Keum Publishing Co., 1989, p. 418-421; Lee Man-Woo, *The Odyssey of Korean Democracy: Korean Politics, 1987-1990*. New York: Praeger, 1990, p. 10.