

**FROM THE SIXTH REPUBLIC TO CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACY:
TRANSFORMATIONS OF SOUTH KOREA'S POLITICAL SYSTEM**

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Abstract: The article explores the process of democratization in the Republic of Korea as a complex and contradictory phenomenon shaped by authoritarian legacies, constitutional reforms, and civic mobilization. It highlights the adoption of the Constitution of the Sixth Republic as a turning point that institutionalized separation of powers and provided a legal basis for democratic governance. The study analyzes the role of successive presidents in consolidating democratic institutions, implementing reforms, and addressing systemic challenges such as corruption, regionalism, and the dominance of presidential authority. Particular attention is given to the instability of South Korea's party system, ideological weakness, and the prevalence of political defections, which undermine public trust and limit the effectiveness of parliamentary representation. The article concludes that despite significant institutional progress, South Korean democracy remains incomplete, as fragile party structures, persistent cleavages, and the centrality of presidential leadership continue to constrain the full realization of democratic consolidation.

Key words: *transformation, democracy, political institutions, Republic of Korea, constitutional order*

In the field of political science, the democratization of South Korea is often interpreted as a multifaceted and at times contradictory process, reflecting the interplay of authoritarian legacies, institutional reforms, and societal demands for change. The trajectory of political development in the Republic of Korea illustrates how fragile constitutional beginnings gradually evolved into a functioning democratic system, shaped by presidential leadership, civic mobilization, and external pressures of modernization.

The rise of Park Geun-hye as the first female president of South Korea has often been described as a symbolic marker of another wave of democratization. Yet, it would be methodologically incorrect to interpret this moment in isolation from the longer historical continuum. The real foundations of modern South Korean democracy were laid in the late 1980s, when the authoritarian model had reached its limits and societal maturity created prerequisites for a transition toward participatory governance. President Roh Tae-woo assumed a decisive role as

the architect of constitutional reforms that introduced the principle of separation of powers, secured presidential succession, and provided the legal groundwork for building civil society and the rule of law. The adoption of the Constitution of the Sixth Republic was therefore a critical turning point, ensuring both political stability and a legitimate framework for democratic practices.

President Kim Young-sam consolidated these achievements by combining the maintenance of political order with the articulation of a new national vision known as the “Sinhanguk Doctrine.” His approach sought to frame the Republic of Korea not only as a stable state but also as a modern democracy anchored in transparency, institutional accountability, and civic participation. Subsequently, President Kim Dae-jung reinforced parliamentary democracy and enhanced the role of the presidency as a legitimate decision-making institution bound by constitutional principles. His presidency also symbolized a shift in South Korea’s democratic consolidation, as the government increasingly aligned political authority with broader democratic expectations.

The reformist tradition was further pursued by President Roh Moo-hyun, who consistently emphasized that all transformations must be grounded in the Constitution. His initiatives were directed toward dismantling authoritarian residues within the political system, strengthening institutional checks and balances, and advancing regional representation. These measures reflected both the deepening of democratization and the persistent challenges associated with political modernization. Yet, alongside these reforms, corruption emerged as a serious structural problem, threatening to undermine public trust in institutions and demonstrating that democratization, while advancing, remained incomplete.

In the scholarly analysis of South Korea’s democratic evolution, the presidential institution has always been viewed as both a driver of transformation and, at times, a source of tension. The 2007 presidential election of Lee Myung-bak is a clear example of this duality. Relying on the accumulated experience of his predecessors and capitalizing on the administration’s emphasis on democratic development during the campaign, Lee was able to secure the confidence of the electorate. Yet, paradoxically, once in office, his administration paid little attention to the entrenched phenomenon of Korean regionalism, a deeply rooted structural factor that has historically shaped voting behavior, political affiliations, and the distribution of political capital. The neglect of this variable highlighted the contradictions within South Korea’s democratization process, where electoral success did not necessarily translate into structural political reform.

The subsequent presidency of Park Geun-hye, who assumed office on February 27, 2013, reflected a somewhat different trajectory. Upon taking power, Park articulated a clear vision of state policy, identifying the fight against corruption as the cornerstone of democratic consolidation.

Corruption, which had by then become almost an ingrained element of the state apparatus, was recognized as a critical threat not only to the legitimacy of government but also to the sustainability of democratic institutions. Her administration, therefore, framed anti-corruption measures as essential for maintaining public trust, strengthening state accountability, and ensuring that the principles of democracy were not reduced to mere formal procedures.

However, in South Korea's political system, democratic processes are shaped not only by the president's personal leadership but also by the broader configuration of the executive branch and its reforms. This became particularly evident in the restructuring of governmental institutions during Park's presidency, when reforms affected two ministerial departments and five governmental committees. These changes led to the dismissal of over 90 civil servants, creating the potential for discontent within the bureaucracy. In order to mitigate resistance, a compromise was reached, which institutionalized the principle of limiting the number of ministries to no more than 15. Such measures reveal the inherent tension between efficiency, political compromise, and administrative legitimacy in the process of democratic governance.

At the same time, the weakness of South Korea's party system further complicates the consolidation of democracy. The political party landscape is marked by instability, with constant reconfigurations, mergers, and dissolutions. Parties frequently lack coherent ideological foundations that could resonate with and mobilize the politically active segment of the population. In this environment, ideology often plays a secondary role, subordinated to pragmatism and immediate electoral interests. A striking example of this dynamic is the phenomenon of political defection: deputies can easily move from an opposition party in decline to a ruling or rising party, regardless of the ideological distance between platforms. This fluidity underscores the transactional and personality-driven nature of South Korean politics.

Electoral campaigns, in turn, reflect this instability. Promises and platforms shift rapidly to align with public opinion or to appeal to temporary popular sympathies, often at the expense of programmatic consistency. Consequently, once elections are won, parties frequently fail to implement their campaign pledges, deepening the gap between citizens' expectations and institutional performance. This pattern contributes to a persistent cycle of political disillusionment, weakening both party legitimacy and public confidence in democratic governance.

Taken together, these developments suggest that South Korean democracy, while institutionally consolidated, remains challenged by structural weaknesses in its party system, regional cleavages, and corruption. The interplay of presidential leadership, administrative reform,

and party instability highlights the contradictory and unfinished character of democratization in the Republic of Korea, making it a compelling case study for comparative political science.

The question arises concerning the constitutional powers of the president, inherited from authoritarian predecessors and characterized by wide authority. As a result, after assuming office, he is absolutely unaccountable, but according to the Constitution of the Republic of Korea, he cannot be elected for a second term.

The diversity of parties and their ideological platforms puts the authority of the president into question. All South Korean resources that could, in one way or another, influence domestic and foreign policy realities are being used in the country. However, despite the apparent clarity of ideologies, the formation of intra-party bases in South Korea is not completed.

According to the Constitution adopted in 1948, South Korea is a presidential republic. It should be noted that over the past 60 years this document has been repeatedly amended, which radically changed the political system of the state, including replacing presidential rule with parliamentary governance. The stages of changes in the Constitution are marked by the numbering of republics.

- First Republic (1948–1960): It is inextricably linked with the name of President Lee Seung-man.

- Second Republic (1960–1962): The military coup of 1961 led to a long period of authoritarian rule.

- Third Republic (1963–1972) and Fourth Republic (1972–1980): Authoritarian rule under General Park Chung-hee.

- Fifth Republic (1980–1987): Continued military dominance.

- Sixth Republic (since 1987): Gradual transformation from authoritarianism to democracy.

The current Constitution of the Republic of Korea was adopted on July 17, 1948; today this is a national holiday. It should be noted that South Korean society decided to adopt American experience: not to adopt a new Constitution in order not to change the political framework, but to amend it. The modern South Korean political system and constitution have existed for just over 30 years. Also, it should be noted that the influence of the American system of government on the South Korean system is quite strong.

According to the amendments made to the Constitution in 1987, the President of the Republic of Korea holds broad powers and serves as the head of state and the executive branch. The president is elected by universal, direct, and secret ballot for a five-year term. Re-election for a second term is prohibited by the Constitution. The elections are held in a single round using a

majoritarian system. The president appoints the prime minister and ministers (whose candidacies are approved by the parliament) and serves as the supreme commander-in-chief of the armed forces. Presidential elections are conducted by direct, universal, and secret ballot.

There are state officials who are not part of the cabinet but are directly subordinate to the president. These are the National Intelligence Service and the Commission for South Korean Civil Service.

The judicial branch is represented by the Supreme Court, and all judges are appointed by the president. Only the approval of the head of the Supreme Court falls within the competence of parliament. In fact, the entire political life of South Korea is under the control of the president. It is in the so-called Blue House (residence in the center of Seoul) that decisions fateful for the entire country are made.

Since the late 2000s, South Korea has been divided into two confrontational camps. Progressive left-wing opposition groups, critical of pro-American tendencies and of the economically developed *chaebols*, support a Western model of democracy but show hostility toward military dictatorship while at the same time sympathizing with the rule of the Kims in North Korea.

They also oppose the presence of Americans in South Korea, describing it as “occupational.” Thus, left political groups in their actions resemble nationalists.

The left–right division of the modern political system dates back to the 1990s. The election of Kim Dae-jung in 1997 divided the electorate by ideological and regional interests.

The results of such political shifts soon became evident: relations between Seoul and Washington became strained, and Roh Moo-hyun actively promoted the issue of withdrawing American troops from South Korea.

Thus, South Korean nationalism is heterogeneous: it can be leftist or radically rightist, and the history of this opposition is based on relations between the president and the government with the participation of the ruling party. At the same time, both branches of Korean nationalism are somewhat similar, differing only in behavior, certain details of political ideology, and methods. Apparent disagreements between left, right, or centrist political groups inevitably lead to sufficiently radical nationalist tendencies. It should also be noted that South Korea is characterized by clan networks in business and government.

A general feature in the development of democratic tendencies is the fight against corruption. No country is protected from this phenomenon. In the Republic of Korea, social reforms are actively carried out, aimed at changing and developing public institutions.

In many democratic countries, parliament is a kind of embodiment of political traditions, an important indicator of political culture. At the same time, it acts as a balancing force in relations between competing political forces, representing the interests of those with less influence on the political life of the country.

But the South Korean model of presidency in most cases was and remains a regime of personal power. Dictatorial presidents, due to their merits in the struggle for independence or under the influence of massive official propaganda, acquired the status of “fathers of the nation” with the powers of an unlimited monarch.

The tasks facing the builders of democratization differ significantly. For some, democracy is a product of successful economic reforms, for others it is a search for the possibilities of reforms. In this case, the Republic of Korea showed the absence of self-sufficiency and the inability to apply the early bourgeois model to the classical market phenomenon, showing itself as a “night watchman” in an unstructured market.

Thus, the Republic of Korea is characterized by a feature indicating the phenomenon of democratization of this state. An important component of South Korean society is all-encompassing state control. The role of the state is seen everywhere: in private business and in personal relations. One may say that South Korean society is one of the most controlled societies of the modern world, but at the same time modern democratic tendencies and institutions coexist within the state.

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