

POLITICAL CULTURE AND TRANSFORMATION OF THE PARTY SYSTEM OF THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA

Salimov Shokhrukh
Researcher of TSUOS

Abstract: *This article analyzes the evolution of political culture and the transformation of the party system in the Republic of Korea within the broader context of democratization studies. The research highlights the paradox of South Korea's political development, where rapid economic modernization under authoritarian regimes created the structural conditions for democratic reforms in the late 1980s. Special attention is given to the historical roots of Korean political culture, including colonial resistance, the establishment of the Provisional Government in 1919, and the influence of civil society movements. The study demonstrates that democratization in South Korea was not a linear process but the result of complex interactions between authoritarian legacies, social mobilization, and institutional reforms. Furthermore, the article examines the instability of the contemporary party system, characterized by weak ideological foundations, frequent party realignments, and populist tendencies. The South Korean case is presented as a unique model for comparative political science, illustrating how democracy can emerge through tensions between societal demands for participation and enduring state control.*

Keywords: *South Korea, democratization, political culture, party system, authoritarianism, civil society, modernization, political transformation.*

Introduction: The study of South Korea's democratization occupies a crucial position in political science, as the country represents a rare example of a successful transformation from authoritarianism to liberal democracy under severe internal and external constraints. The Republic of Korea's trajectory demonstrates how economic modernization, social mobilization, and institutional reforms can interact to dismantle authoritarian practices and lay the groundwork for a consolidated democracy. Importantly, the Korean case illustrates that democratization is not a linear or uniform process; rather, it emerges through tensions between entrenched authoritarian structures and societal demands for participation, equality, and political accountability. This complexity makes South Korea an especially valuable subject in comparative political analysis.

In the post-war period of the 1950s, South Korea faced profound governance challenges, marked by the lack of competent leadership, widespread poverty, and a collapsing economy. Nevertheless, it was precisely in this difficult context that the foundations for future transformations were established. The authoritarian modernization

project of General Park Chung-hee (1961–1979) initiated rapid industrialization, export-oriented development, and state-led economic reforms. Although his rule is often associated with repressive politics, it simultaneously created the material and structural preconditions for the irreversible democratic reforms of the 1980s and 1990s⁴. The paradox of South Korea's development lies in the fact that economic success under an authoritarian regime eventually fueled broader societal demands for political liberalization, thus setting in motion processes of democratic change.

To fully grasp the dynamics of South Korea's democratic institution-building, it is necessary to examine not only its modern history but also the deeper historical roots of its constitutional order. During the Joseon dynasty, Western cultural influences gradually penetrated Korean society, stimulating the emergence of progressive social and political groups that embraced the ideals of the "civilization movement." These groups were among the first to articulate the necessity of economic and political reforms, recognizing modernization as the key to strengthening statehood and ensuring sovereignty. However, this indigenous reformist momentum was abruptly interrupted by Japanese colonial occupation, which suppressed national modernization efforts and subordinated the Korean polity to imperial control⁵.

Yet, colonial domination also fostered strong anti-Japanese resistance, which simultaneously functioned as a movement for the creation of an "independent, modern, and democratic state." A crucial milestone in this struggle was the establishment of the Provisional Government of Korea in Shanghai in 1919. This institution not only symbolized the Korean nation's aspiration for sovereignty but also embedded into the future Constitution the vision of constructing a "free and democratic state." Thus, the seeds of democratic consciousness were sown under colonial repression, demonstrating the resilience of national identity and its importance for the later institutionalization of democracy.

Following Japan's unconditional surrender in the summer of 1945 and the subsequent end of World War II, the Republic of Korea was officially proclaimed on August 15, 1945. From the very beginning, the newly established state was institutionally anchored in the principles of liberal democracy and a free market economy, as enshrined in its founding constitutional order. These foundations reflected both external influences, particularly from the United States, and internal aspirations for sovereignty, modernization, and political participation. However, the subsequent political trajectory of South Korea revealed that the establishment of democratic institutions on paper did not automatically translate into their practical realization. The gap between constitutional design and political reality made clear that democratization in Korea was neither immediate nor inevitable, but rather an arduous and contested process conditioned by historical legacies, authoritarian structures, and Cold War geopolitics.

⁴ Lee Hyo Weng. History of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea // Lee Wang Won, Zing Dae Gyu et al. Korean Politics 70 years, - Gyeonggi-do: Central Institute for the Study of Korean Science, 2015. p. 159.

⁵ Han S. J. The Failure of Democracy in South Korea. University of California Press, 1974. p. 255.

Despite formal constitutional commitments to liberal democracy, from 1948 until 1987 the Republic of Korea remained under successive authoritarian regimes, each of which consolidated power through fraudulent elections, systemic suppression of civil liberties, and the dominance of executive authority at the expense of both legislative and judicial independence. This long authoritarian interlude illustrated the profound structural challenges of consolidating democracy in a society simultaneously undergoing rapid economic transformation and operating within the tense geopolitical environment of the Cold War. The South Korean case thus underscores a central paradox in comparative democratization studies: while democratic frameworks may be constitutionally enshrined, their effective functioning depends on social mobilization, institutional balance, and elite consensus, all of which were absent for much of the nation's early history.

The presidency of Syngman Rhee, the first head of state of the Republic of Korea, epitomized the authoritarian character of this formative era. Rhee's rule was marked by repeated manipulations of the political system, including electoral fraud, the restriction of political rights and civil liberties, and the passage of constitutional amendments imposed through heavy-handed parliamentary pressure (...). The democratic deficit of the regime became increasingly intolerable to South Korean society, culminating in a dramatic turning point on April 19, 1960. Known as the "April Revolution," this mass mobilization was triggered by the fraudulent elections in which Rhee was elected to a fourth presidential term as the sole candidate. The protests, led largely by students and supported by broad social groups, forced Rhee's resignation and seemed to open the possibility for meaningful democratic reforms. Yet the transitional government under Prime Minister Chang Myon, despite its initial commitment to liberalization, quickly descended into political chaos. Weak institutions, factionalism, and the lack of a stable democratic culture undermined reform efforts, demonstrating that authoritarian exit did not necessarily guarantee democratic consolidation.

This institutional vacuum created the conditions for a return of authoritarianism through military intervention. In 1961, General Park Chung-hee seized power through a coup d'état, inaugurating nearly two decades of military-backed rule that lasted until his assassination in 1979. Park's era is often described in political science literature as a "developmental dictatorship," one that prioritized rapid economic modernization over democratic institution-building⁶. His administration implemented sweeping economic policies that transformed South Korea into a rapidly industrializing nation and laid the groundwork for the so-called "Miracle on the Han River." Yet this modernization project was accompanied by deep political repression, censorship, and the systematic curtailment of opposition activities. Consequently, while Park's legacy is frequently associated with unprecedented economic growth, it also became synonymous with one of the darkest chapters in the political history of South Korea, when the democratization process was effectively frozen.

⁶ Kim Tae Joon. The path to the new millennium of hope and prosperity // Seoul. News. 2003. No. 7. P. 27.

Paradoxically, however, the very success of Park's economic modernization project planted the seeds for the subsequent democratization movement. Rising educational levels, urbanization, and the expansion of a politically conscious middle class generated mounting societal demands for participation, equality, and accountability. By the late 1970s, mass demonstrations against the authoritarian regime had once again erupted, signaling that despite decades of repression, the democratic aspirations of South Korean society remained resilient and irrepressible⁷. These mobilizations not only challenged the legitimacy of authoritarian rule but also redefined the trajectory of Korea's political development, setting the stage for the dramatic democratic breakthroughs of the 1980s.

The study of the political dynamics of the Republic of Korea from the late 1970s to the present constitutes an essential direction in comparative political science, as this process demonstrates the transformation of an authoritarian regime into a democratic system under the conditions of modernization and globalization. The South Korean case illustrates how the combination of domestic protest movements, the pressure of civil society, and changes in the international environment can reshape political institutions and provide a sustainable framework for democratization.

In the autumn of 1979, following the assassination of President Park Chung-hee, the country entered a new stage in its political history. Power passed to Chun Doo-hwan, then head of the National Security Command. At the outset of his rule, constitutional reforms institutionalized authoritarian practices: the Constitution of October 27, 1980, introduced indirect presidential elections, a seven-year presidential term, and the president's right to declare a state of emergency, thus consolidating executive dominance⁸.

Nevertheless, South Korean society was increasingly mobilized against authoritarianism. The anti-dictatorship movement, remembered as the "Seoul Spring" continued to gain momentum throughout the early 1980s. By 1987, these democratic mobilizations reached their climax, with the population demanding fundamental reforms to address systemic social and institutional problems. The main achievement of this struggle was the adoption of the new Constitution on October 27, 1987, which remains in force today. It introduced direct presidential elections and effectively ended a thirty-year period of military dictatorship⁹.

The 1993 presidential election marked another milestone with the victory of Kim Young-sam, the first civilian leader after decades of military dominance. His administration symbolized a break with authoritarian practices and further institutionalized democratic governance. In 1998, Kim Dae-jung, an iconic figure of Korea's democratic movement, assumed the presidency. His peaceful accession to power represented a historic breakthrough and strengthened democratic institutions.

⁷ Vekg Uyu Dream. Korea Democracy Development // Literary License, Seoul. 2003. No 3. P. 363

⁸ Drobyshev E. Korean policy of Russia requires adjustment // Problems of the Far East, 1996. No 1. P. 238

⁹ Kim Wee Huang. This is democracy. Seoul: Sang Zi Sa 2013.p. 5

In 2002, Roh Moo-hyun was elected president, describing his administration as a “participatory government.” His policy emphasized civic involvement in decision-making and the decentralization of political power, redistributing authority across levels of governance. Although he resigned in 2007, his legacy significantly influenced democratization and regional development¹⁰.

His successor, Lee Myung-bak, relied on the democratic foundations laid by his predecessors. However, the democratic trajectory was again challenged under Park Geun-hye, the first female president of South Korea, inaugurated in 2013. Despite the symbolic nature of her presidency, her administration was marred by corruption scandals, sparking another wave of democratization in 2016, with demands for executive reform and greater transparency¹¹.

The subsequent reforms transformed two ministries and five committees, resulting in the resignation of more than 90 high-ranking officials¹². These developments highlighted the dynamism of South Korea’s political system and its ability to regenerate under social pressure.

However, the party system remains fragile and unstable. Parties lack coherent ideological bases, and legislators frequently switch affiliations depending on electoral advantages and shifts in public opinion. Campaign promises are often populist and rarely fulfilled, eroding public trust in party politics.

For countries in transition, the challenges of democratization vary: in some cases, democracy is sought as a tool for economic reform, while in others it is the product of successful modernization. In South Korea, democratization has been inseparable from economic development. The state retains a strong presence in nearly all spheres - from business to personal relations - creating a unique paradox: democracy coexists with powerful state control. Consequently, the South Korean case demonstrates that democratization is not a linear process but a complex interplay between democratic aspirations and institutional governance, making it one of the most compelling subjects of political science research.

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¹¹ Park Geun-hye became the first female president in South Korea history. - <http://ria.ru/world/20121219/915491011.html> (09.10.2025)

¹² Tolstokulakov I. A. Development of the democratic process and the constitutional issue in South Korea // News of the Oriental Institute, Federal State Autonomous Educational Institution of Higher Education "Far Eastern Federal University". 1999. No 5.p. 143

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