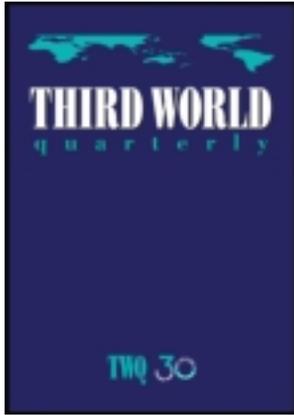


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The Dilemmas of Korea's New Democracy in an Age of Neoliberal Globalisation

KWANG-YEONG SHIN

ABSTRACT This paper explores how the return to power by the authoritarian conservative Grand National Party after a decade of liberal government was possible, drawing attention to the mode of democratic transition and its impact on democratic consolidation, and to the role of civil society in South Korea. It examines how the democratic transition by pact failed to eliminate the legacies of authoritarianism within the state and civil society and contributed to the maintenance of authoritarian civic organisations established by the military regime. Whilst liberal democratic parties took power in the midst of the East Asian financial crisis, they ultimately undermined their own social bases by carrying out neoliberal economic reforms in order to tackle the crisis. The rise of conservative civil society in the 2000s formed the social base upon which the Grand National Party was able to regain state power through a significant shift in voters' party preference. Its reorganisation of the conservative civic organisations played a key role in mobilising frustrated voters to support it in 2007. The Korean experience of democratisation demonstrates that democratic transition is not only a political process but also a social and economic process, revealing that in Korea civil society has been far from democratic.

Following 10 years of liberal democratic government rule, South Korea's (henceforward Korea) former authoritarian party, the Grand National Party (GNP),¹ returned to power with a landslide victory in the presidential election of 2007 and the general election of 2008. The conservative GNP, having recaptured both government and parliament, proceeded to try and demolish the political reforms carried out by the liberal democratic parties over the previous decade.² Thus, following the fierce democratic struggle against authoritarianism that had continued for more than 35 years, the liberal democratic parties held power for barely a decade. The return of the GNP to power represented a significant setback in the process of democratic consolidation, with the revival of the state's control over the media,

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repression of the labour movement, and infringement of civil rights by the police. This demonstrates that the process of democratic consolidation presents new challenges of a completely different nature to that of democratic transition.

The odyssey of Korean democratisation sheds light upon the dilemmas surrounding the formal electoral and democratic transition by pact as an outcome of compromise between the incumbent political party and opposition elites. By keeping political activists and student organisations away from the negotiating table, leaders of the ruling and opposition parties negotiated a stable transition and sought to prevent either radical groups or the military from impeding an orderly democratic transition.³ Hedging against the uncertainty of the collapse of the authoritarian bloc, both incumbents and opposition elites held a common interest in adopting strategies for a stable transition. As elites of the existing political parties monopolised the process of democratisation, popular movements were completely excluded in the process of establishing new rules. Thus, this pact between incumbent and opposition elites was limited to the institutional reform of electoral procedures and voting rights, without dealing with issues relating to democratic consolidation, such as the removal of the anti-democratic apparatus and of authoritarian social forces within state and civil society. Still less did it seek to bring about a radical re-shifting of the power balance between labour and capital by lifting the state oppression of the labour movement.⁴ While some scholars argue that the crisis of democracy after democratisation lies in the underdevelopment of the party system in Korea,⁵ I argue that it is an outcome of the strategic interaction between state and civil society under the constraints of democratic transition by pact.

Democratisation in Korea also illuminates the dilemma faced by liberal democratic governments in an era of neoliberal globalisation. Neoliberal economic reforms implemented by democratic governments can undermine the social basis of the democratic government itself. While the economic crisis of the late 1990s challenged the governability and accountability of the GNP and contributed to the demise of the authoritarian regime, it also placed significant obstacles in the way of democratic transition. The IMF imposed neoliberal reforms on the new democratic government that were based on Washington Consensus policies—enhancing labour market flexibility, privatisation of the public sector, opening financial markets and transformation of the governance structure of family-owned conglomerates (*chaebol*)—and the political impacts of these reforms were detrimental to democratic consolidation in the post-crisis period. While the new democratic Kim Dae-Jung government (1998–2003) fully accepted neoliberal reforms as a way of rescuing the moribund economy, it faced strong opposition from workers and peasants. Such popular movements were excluded from the political process and the democratic transition did not bring about any radical transformation of an economy, hitherto dominated by *chaebol*. On the contrary, the reforms intensified social polarisation and brought increasing poverty. The militant labour movement was also incorporated into the emerging neoliberal capitalist system and largely failed to build any

independent power base in national politics or to exercise leadership among social movements.⁶ Thus, the hegemony of neoliberal capitalism was maintained even after the electoral success of the democratic parties in the 2000s. Furthermore, the new democratic regime not only alienated workers, farmers and the urban poor through the implementation of neoliberal reform, but also fostered the revival of a conservative civil society and the authoritarian party in the late 2000s.

By 2005 the politicisation of conservative civil society had begun and the GNP regained power following the presidential election of 2007. This rising popularity of the GNP was closely related to the democratic transition by pact and the neoliberal economic reforms adopted by the Kim Dae-Jung (1998–2002) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08) governments. In this paper I argue that the democratic transition by pact allowed the conservative civic organisations and the GNP to survive unreformed, thereby restricting political reform to the procedural rules mostly associated with elections and civil rights. In addition, by adopting neoliberal economic reforms, the liberal democratic governments of Kim and Roh undermined their own political support, as they failed to meet the high expectations of the public. Persistent neoliberal economic policies by the Kim and Roh governments led to the deterioration of the economic circumstances of unorganised workers and the poor. It was this mass frustration of the public that resulted in the GNP's landslide victory in late 2007.

I also argue that the concept of civil society as deployed in studies of democratic transition is largely misleading, because it is assumed that civil society is by its very nature democratic.⁷ However, the nature of civil society can be determined in terms of its relation to the nature of the state. When the conservative civil society organisations, in alliance with the GNP, challenged the democratic government, the failure of democratic consolidation became apparent. Civil society has shown stronger path dependency than the state because there is no regular competition and contestation within civil society. The oppression of the old civic organisations by the government was impossible both during the negotiated democratic transition and under the democratic regime. The dilemma of the democratic transition by pact is that this institutional legacy of the authoritarian regime is extremely difficult to remove and it has thereby become an obstacle to the consolidation of democracy. Old guards and civic organisations nurtured by the authoritarian regime were able to survive in the newly liberalised political environment. They become entrenched as social bases of conservative political mobilisation and are detrimental to the consolidation of democracy. These critical constraints to democratisation resulting from the democratic transition by pact have cast a dark shadow on the road to democracy in South Korea.

The mode of democratic transition in South Korea

Following the success of the people's struggle for democracy in June 1987, Korea began to display quite different political dynamics from that of the era of authoritarian rule. One of these new dynamics was that institutional party

politics began to replace street protest movements in shaping the political agenda and making institutional reforms. Radical student protests and violent street skirmishes, which were typical parts of the urban scene in major cities in South Korea in the 1980s, dwindled. Instead, political bargaining associated with presidential and general elections began to shape the trajectory of political development.

As nationwide demonstrations threatened the total collapse of the military regime in 1987, President Chun Doo-Hwan was faced with two options. The first was to deploy the military to suppress the protests, as he had done in the city of Kwangju in May 1980 following his own military coup. At that time General Chun responded to protests there by besieging Kwangju and putting down the protesters by military force, killing hundreds of people.⁸ He then proceeded to become president of the fifth republic, from 1981 to 1987. On 29 April 1987, President Chun picked Roh Tae-woo as his successor, an act made possible by the fifth republic's authoritarian constitution. This act provoked massive nationwide protests against Chun. The protestors made calls for the abolition of the constitution and for competitive presidential elections. Unlike the student-led demonstrations in Kwangju seven years earlier, the June uprising of 1987 saw demonstrations in major urban areas across Korea. These included demonstrations in Seoul of more than two million citizens, involving not just students but also white collar employees and small shop owners.⁹ For the regime military repression was a dangerous choice one year before the Seoul Olympics, since deployment of the military could have potentially led to an international boycott of the games.¹⁰ It therefore became difficult for Chun to suppress the nationwide demonstrations by force. The second choice was a negotiated democratic transition so as to avoid the collapse of the ruling bloc. In spite of some internal disputes, President Chun opted for political transition by negotiation. Although the strategy of political negotiation was passive and defensive in the sense that it was merely a reaction to the demands of the opposition, it was able to avoid the worst-case scenario of a complete collapse of the regime. Thus, on 29 June 1987, Roh Tae-woo, the presidential candidate of the ruling party, accepted popular demands for free and competitive elections by declaring plans to revise the constitution in order to end the indirect election of the president by the National Assembly. The opposition parties also welcomed the 29 June Declaration, regarding it as a response to the people's demand for democracy.

To facilitate the democratic transition, the opposition party installed the 'Eight Person Committee'. This committee comprised four delegates from the authoritarian ruling party (at this time, the Democratic Justice Party) and another four from the largest opposition party (the Democratic Party), thereby excluding small opposition parties as well as the radical political activists, university students and organisations who had most actively participated in the protest movement.¹¹ This exclusion of activists and students from the negotiating table made the tug-of-war between the ruling and opposition party delegates more manageable from the perspective of the ruling party. Furthermore, there was a high likelihood of internal conflicts

within the opposition camp because of the personal rivalry between opposition leaders, and in particular, between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam. Leaders of the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) therefore believed that they could maintain power throughout the negotiations for democratic reform by means of manipulating different political interests among opposition delegates.¹²

While negotiation for political reforms was under way, workers' protests erupted immediately following the 29 June declaration. The largest workers' strikes in Korean history took place among the major industrial belts of the southern region; most of them were unorganised and spontaneous wildcat strikes. Major heavy industries were engulfed in industrial conflict and the disruption of production even threatened the national economy. This explosion of workers' discontent resulted from more than two decades of oppression by the military regime and capital, and took the form of demands for workers' rights and wage increases.¹³ However, as strikes escalated through the summer, the urban middle class began to withdraw their support and sought a more stable democratisation that would guarantee their own liberal political demands. Popular demands for radical transformation of the economic system had long been a part of the democratic movement. The radical fraction of student movement organisations and labour activists, commonly called the People's Democracy group, had pursued the liberation of the working class as one of its central aims.¹⁴ Strikers in the summer of 1987, partially influenced by the radicalism of students and labour activists, demanded the legalisation of worker's individual and collective rights.

However, labour interests could not be incorporated into the political agenda of the Eight Person Committee as the bargaining table was dominated by the ruling and opposition party to the exclusion of other social and political groups. Opposition leaders were also worried about the possibility that the rise of the militant labour movement might hamper the process of stable democratic transition.¹⁵ They pursued a strategy of stable democratic transition because they believed they could only win competitive presidential elections if the wider social and political turmoil was reduced. Concerned about the possibility of military intervention, the Democratic Party attenuated its political demands and neglected labour issues. Adopting a minimalist strategy, the opposition leaders demanded minimal reforms confined to procedural democracy, such as free and competitive presidential and legislature elections and the lifting of government control of the media.

With the new constitution in place the first free presidential election for nearly two decades took place in December 1987. However, the former army general, Roh Tae-woo, won the election with 36.6% of votes as a result of the split in the opposition vote. The prominent opposition leaders Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung both believed they could win without a unified candidacy. However, the election resulted in the worst possible outcome, with the authoritarian DJP retaining power through democratic means. Given that the DJP was able to achieve political legitimacy through competitive elections, democratic consolidation became restricted to limited areas.¹⁶ Furthermore,

social movements for democracy faced serious setbacks as a result of emerging internal conflicts among political activists.

In the early 1990s new citizens' movement organisations (CMOs) pushed for democratic consolidation. Seeing explosive growth since the early 1990s, the CMOs were favoured by the urban middle class in the major cities. Their national centres were mostly located in Seoul with regional branches established nationwide. They were concerned with social and economic issues affecting the everyday lives of the people, including economic justice, corruption, the abuse of administrative power, human and environmental rights, political reform, etc. For example, in 1989, the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) proclaimed that economic justice was an important issue that should be pursued by social movements. Another influential CMO was the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), formed by progressive activists and intellectuals in 1994. The PSPD attempted to evoke public awareness through non-violent methods such as campaigns, public litigation and petitioning for legislation. The PSPD adopted a somewhat more progressive stance to these issues than the CCEJ. In addition, the Civil Action for the 2000 General Election and the minority shareholders' campaign were among the most successful activities, attracting massive public attention and achieving significant progress in political and economic reform. These new CMOs differed from the older militant class-based *Minjung* movement, which included radical political movements alongside labour and peasant movements.¹⁷ Although leaders of the GCMOs had their origins in the *Minjung* movement, the issues they addressed were related to the everyday life of the people as consumers, residents, parents and commuters, as well as to political transformation.¹⁸ Their emergence represented a significant realignment of social movements in response to the political development and social change of the 1990s.

The rise of the discourse on 'civil society' was a reflection of the changing perceptions towards social movements after the onset of the democratic transition in 1987. It had originally emerged in Europe and the USA following the collapse of Eastern European countries between 1989 and 1992. It was similarly conceived of as a theoretical perspective to explain the transformation of Korean social movements from the anti-dictatorship movements of the 1980s to the citizen's movements of the early 1990s.¹⁹ To use O'Donnell and Schmitter's term,²⁰ the 'resurrection of civil society' immediately dominated the discursive space of the opposition movements. While this contributed to the broadening of the scope of democratisation, it also served to undermine the political role and influence of the labour movement and to marginalise it from the opposition movement in general. While CMOs tackled a variety of issues, such as democracy, anti-corruption, human rights, environmental pollution and peace, labour unions tended to concentrate mostly on wage hikes and improvements in working conditions in their workplaces under the enterprise union system.

However, the new unionism of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), an alternative union confederation formed in 1995 and an heir of the 1980s democratic labour movement, advocated a form of 'social unionism'

that located the labour movement within a broader social movement extending beyond the workplace.²¹ Unlike the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), which had been financially supported by the government, the KCTU, as an independent union confederation, pursued social reform and democratisation. Thus, the general strike led by the KCTU against the restrictive revision of the labour laws in December 1996 invoked a high level of participation by rank-and-file workers as well as broad popular support and was successful in forcing the government to revise the labour laws again in January 1997. However, almost all subsequent general strikes called by the KCTU in the 2000s failed because of the low level of participation by local unions and their members, alongside limited public support.²² The accumulation of defeats and the marginalisation from public discourse reinforced the tendency whereby local unions concentrated on issues related to the factory or enterprise. While labour has played a key role in consolidating democracy in many countries, Korean labour experienced serious crisis in its social base and political space.²³

Regime change and the mobilisation of conservative civil society

Kim Dae-jung, a central figure in the decades-long struggle for democracy, finally succeeded in winning the presidential election in late 1997. However, he was forced to make a coalition with a minority ultra-rightist party, the United Liberal Democratic Party. The party's leader Kim Jong-pil was a former lieutenant-major who joined the military coup with Park Chung-Hee in 1961, founded the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, and served as Park's prime minister. The formation of the coalition government was necessary because both Kim Dae-Jung's National Congress for the New Politics (1995–2000) and the United Liberal Democratic Party (1995–2006) were too small to win the presidential election independently. Thus, in spite of their widely divergent political ideologies and personal backgrounds, a strategic coalition was formed by Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil. Although this strange cohabitation ended with the exit of the United Liberal Democratic Party from the coalition government in September 2001, the political deal between Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil contributed to the persistence of the conservative civic organisations that had been sponsored by the authoritarian regime. This strategic cohabitation between the two politicians therefore reduced the possibility for the legacies of authoritarianism in the state and civil society to be eradicated.

In addition, the Kim Dae-Jung government was not able to yield administrative power in order to weaken the anti-democratic bloc, because it was forced to focus on economic reforms in response to the economic crisis and the bailout conditions of the IMF. The Kim government sought to revive the national economy through the adoption of various neoliberal reforms and thus the issue of democratic consolidation was not an immediate concern for the government. Even after Kim Jong-pil resigned as prime minister of the coalition government the coalition in January 2000, the ruling party did not change its political strategy with regard to democratic consolidation.

In the run-up to the 2002 presidential election Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), a former human rights lawyer and a new figure in the political realm, emerged as a popular politician. Because of the low popularity of Kim Dae-Jung's party (now renamed the New Millennium Democratic Party), an open primary voting system was introduced for the first time. This involved open competition among candidates at the local provincial level and also took into account national opinion polls so as to raise public attention. With this new voting system Roh was able to win the primary round, since, although he was not popular within the party itself, he enjoyed strong public support. Roh's success was a shock to the old guard in the party and this became one of the reasons for the subsequent split, as discussed below. Nonetheless, Roh was able to defeat conservative candidate, Lee Hoi-Chang, in the presidential election of December 2002.²⁴

The rise of conservative civil society

The consecutive defeats of the GNP in the presidential elections of 1997 and 2002 made the party ever more hostile to the ruling party. In both elections the conservative political party (renamed the GNP in 1997) was represented by Lee Hoi-Chang, a graduate from the prestigious Seoul National University and former Chief of Justice of the Supreme Court. In contrast, Roh Moo-hyun had only graduated from a commercial high school but, nonetheless, before entering politics, had proceeded to become a human rights lawyer after passing the bar exam. Lee Hoi-Chang's defeat was therefore a major defeat for the conservative ruling class. Unlike Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun placed democratic political reforms at the centre of his national agenda. As Roh attempted to reform political society by destroying the party structure based on regionalism, he established the non-regional Uri party in November 2003. As noted above, although Roh had become president of the New Millennium Democratic Party (NMDP), his victory was not based on party support but on mass popularity. The Uri Party, with around one-seventh of the seats in the National Assembly, generated a massive hostile response from the larger opposition parties, and particularly from the GNP, which remained the majority party in the National Assembly. When President Roh supported the formation of the Uri party by splitting away from the NMDP, both the GNP and the NMDP colluded to impeach him for violating the code of presidential political neutrality.²⁵ While fiercely resisted by the Uri party, the GNP, with 144 seats, and the NMDP, with 62 seats in the National Assembly, succeeded in impeaching the president on 12 March 2004. This act left it up to the Constitutional Court to decide whether President Roh had violated the constitution or not.

Social movement organisations immediately established a nationwide network to protest against the impeachment. As many as two million people were involved in protests against the impeachment for a period of 63 days until the Constitutional Court's decision was made. Moreover, 972 social movement organisations united under the name of the National Headquarters of the Anti-Impeachment Movement and included almost all major

social movement organisations, such as the PSPD, Environmental Movements United, the CCEJ and Women's Movements Unions.²⁶ The general election of 15 April effectively served as a public referendum on the impeachment, and resulted in the absolute victory of the Uri party over the other opposition parties as a result of strong public support for President Roh. While the Uri party won 152 seats, the two main opposition parties got only 130 seats. Furthermore, on 14 May 2004, the Constitutional Court announced that the impeachment of President Roh by the National Assembly was invalid. Thus, the impeachment attempt ended in total failure for the opposition parties and a dramatic victory for Roh and the Uri party.

However, the 2000s saw the continuous reorganisation of the conservative civic organisations that had been sponsored by the former military regime and turned into rightist organisations in opposition to the new democratic governments. The establishment of the New Right Union (NRU) in 2005 symbolised this upsurge of conservative social movements. While the differentiation of social movements in the early 1990s was differentiation in phenotype, the formation of these new right movements in the 2000s might be regarded as differentiation in genotype in terms of their origins and nature. The differentiation of the 1990s occurred among those social organisations that had contributed to the struggle for democracy. The differentiation of movements of the 2000s, however, was based more on ideological boundaries. The NRU consists of newly organised conservative organisations as well as various bodies that had been sponsored by the military regime in the 1970s and 1980s. However, it proclaimed that the 'new right' was different, in that it was critical of the old right's support for the dictatorship, and insisted that it supported political liberalism as well as economic liberalism. Comprised of conservative Christian churches, veterans' organisations, business organisations and media, the NRU argued that the new right, in contrast to the old right, advocated the importance of civil rights and recognised the importance of the struggle for democracy.²⁷

Such organisations became reliable social bases for the presidential elections and for the counter-social movement of the 2000s. The NRU, for example, played an important role in mobilising conservative voices in the run-up to conservative candidate Lee Myung-bak's victory in the presidential election in 2007, largely by condemning the incumbent government as communist and pro-North. Lee's victory and the rise of the new right also indicated the degree of bi-polarisation of South Korean civil society and that civil society can by no means be regarded as fundamentally homogeneous and pro-democratic in nature.

One of the new strategies by which the GNP sought to reorganise the conservative bloc was to revise conservative ideologies in order to attack the reform policies of the new government. Given that the 1997 financial crisis had contributed to Kim Dae-Jung's victory in the presidential election that year, the conservative party found it difficult to mobilise conservative social groups and was defensive in its political strategy as a result of its own role in causing the crisis. While conservative social organisations were to some extent damaged by the political reforms under the new democracy, they were

at the same time able to fully utilise the strengthened civil rights in order to resist any attempts to restrict their activities.

The major conservative social organisations consisted of two groups: the old civic organisations sponsored by the authoritarian regime and the new conservative social movement organisations. The military regime in the 1970s had developed extensive organisational networks in civil society in order to extend its social base and thereby consolidate authoritarian rule. These grassroots organisations included community, veteran and women's organisations.²⁸ Following the Kuomintang's strategy to organise Taiwanese civil society, the military regime in Korea similarly sought to build nationwide social organisations in order to mobilise popular support and initiate mass social movements. Two main principles of organisation emerged during this period of the military rule. The first was that of strengthening the military regime's social support base through a corporatist strategy. In 1970 the regime organised the New Community Movement (NCM),²⁹ which emphasised social and economic values such as hard work, self-help and cooperation in order to mobilise the public. It also aimed at forestalling the development of social movements directed against the military regime. In turn, the New Community Movement Association (NCMA) was established to orchestrate the NCM nationwide. The workplace or local community became the NCMA's basic unit of organisation. The second principle was the mobilisation and propagation of anti-communist ideology through the organisation of the Civil Defense Corps (CDC) in 1975. This initiative occurred in response to the downfall of South Vietnam and sought to preempt the emergence of an anti-dictatorship student movement. The CDC, headed by the prime minister, was not a voluntary organisation, since all males between the ages of 20 and 40 were required to become members. Organised at the workplace and local community levels, its main purpose was to prepare for an emergency invoked by North Korea. Emergency drills have been carried out every month in preparation for the scenario of a North Korean airstrike. Indeed, this reflected the authoritarian regime's continuous invocation of the threat posed by North Korea and the utilisation of this state of permanent threat in order to repress political dissidents.

Although President Roh Tae-woo was a former army general, the new government in 1987 was unable to exercise physical force to repress political opposition as before. The fact that two-thirds of voters had opposed Roh Tae-woo in the presidential election meant that the new government enjoyed limited legitimacy. As a result, it sought to expand its social base by creating conservative civilian organisations in the major cities and provinces. The Society for a Better Tomorrow (SBT), for example, was established in 1989 as a social movement organisation aimed at propagating conservative morality. As a nationwide organisation headed by conservative elites the SBT pursued the aim of rebuilding the 'moral righteousness' of the people. As a quasi-state organisation its financial resources mostly came from the government, and several successive presidents of the SBT also became lawmakers in the ruling party. Thus, Roh Tae-Woo and his DJP's capture of state power in 1987 meant that these quasi-state organisations developed under the authoritarian

regime could be maintained even after the democratic transition. While demands for democratic reform continued to be made, the state apparatus developed under the authoritarian rule and the conservative civic organisations were able to persist and function as grassroots bases of conservative political mobilisation.

The Kim Dae-jung era saw the further development of conservative social movement organisations, particularly in response to the historic summit between President Kim and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il.³⁰ For example, the Citizens United for Better Society (CUBS), formed in 2002, explicitly criticised the Kim Dae-jung government for allegedly undermining liberal democracy and the market economy by relying on egalitarianism and collectivism.³¹ CUBS aimed to mobilise conservative voices against the Kim government and, at the same time, to counteract progressive social movement organisations. Framing itself as a liberal and pro-market civic organisation, it criticised many other progressive organisations as 'socialist' or 'communist' and, in doing so, denied liberal democratic rights such as the freedom of the press and freedom of thought. Furthermore, the Korea Parent Federation, established in 2006 and supported by the GNP and conservative churches, criticised workers' strikes and student demonstrations as activities benefiting North Korea, and it demanded their violent repression by the state.³²

While there was some variation in ideological orientation among the conservative civic organisations, they shared in common a strong anti-North Korean and anti-communist ideology and support for the Korean–American military alliance. The ideological orientation of the New Right Union, for example, can be summarised as a mixture of neoliberalism and anti-communism.³³ Its establishment in June 2005 was a strategic choice made by the GNP in response to the failure of the impeachment of President Roh. It recognised that, without the orchestrated mobilisation of social groups hostile to or critical of the Roh government, it would be impossible for the party to regain power. With the help of the major conservative newspapers, the GNP and the NRU were able to gain support from those who had experienced deterioration of their economic status as a result of the policy failures of Roh's presidency. They castigated the government as incapable of dealing with the economy properly.³⁴ Even humanitarian aid to the North was criticised as an improper distribution of financial resources. The conservative bloc defined the two terms of democratic governments as the 'lost 10 years', arguing that the two governments were 'leftist' and 'pro-North' and had brought about the regression of Korean society.³⁵ The GNP articulated a new discourse directed against Roh's North Korea policy by criticising economic aid as exacerbating economic hardship in the South.³⁶

The presidential election in December 2007 served as a test to which the conservatives could mobilise voters. The GNP candidate, Lee Myung-bak, achieved a landslide victory over the candidate of the ruling Democratic Party, Chung Dong-young. This significant shift in voting patterns from the previous general election of 2004 was also a result of the increasing insecurity and instability faced by the general public.³⁷ Through a comprehensive set of

neoliberal economic reforms, the Roh government had failed to provide stability for the poor, the workers and the peasants. The continuous increase in the number of precarious workers and working poor had served to undermine the social bases of the ruling party. Even the urban middle class suffered from increasing job insecurity and economic uncertainty. As housing prices doubled during the Roh government's term, young couples were unable to purchase houses. The result was that those who were disappointed with the poor economic performance of the Roh administration switched their support to the GNP.³⁸

Candlelight demonstration and illiberal democracy

Upon his election, President Lee, former CEO of Hyundai Construction and Mayor of Seoul, sought to erase the legacy of the two democratic governments by adopting a set of diametrically opposed policies. He criticised the Sunshine policy pursued by Kim and Roh, which had sought to establish a peaceful relationship with the North through such measures as the building of an industrial complex in Kaesong city and a tourist resort at Mount Keumgang in North Korea. With Lee's hardline policy towards the North, official exchanges at the governmental level were stopped and the resort at Mount Keumgang was closed. The Lee Myung-bak government also pursued business-friendly economic policies, with tax cuts and deregulation of the economy. Thanks to corporate tax cuts large corporations were able to enjoy increasing profits.³⁹ The Lee government also adopted a harsh law-and-order policy against the labour movement and suppressed labour strikes. Business also displayed an intransigent attitude towards labour, to the extent that collective bargaining became increasingly contested.

Lee also adopted a strongly pro-American foreign policy. On a visit to the USA, he signed an agreement permitting the import of American beef, an act that provoked massive public anger because of concerns over possible 'mad cow' disease (BSE). Following the failure of American beef to pass Korea's National Quarantine Inspection in 2003, imports had been halted until appropriate safety standards could be met. However, President Lee, signed an agreement with George Bush without any consideration of the public health issue. This act infuriated the public and mass protests took place in downtown Seoul. The protests were remarkable for their wide-ranging participation, including mothers with children, young girls concerned about their health and numerous civic organisations.⁴⁰ The internet was widely used as a forum for criticising the government and for sharing information about BSE. 'Agora', an internet discussion forum, became an important site for sharing information about the disease and for expressing solidarity with the demonstrators. The protests lasted for around 100 days and, on 10 June, involved more than one million participants, the largest demonstration to take place in Korea since the June uprising 21 years earlier.⁴¹

The police revived old measures that had been used during the authoritarian regime against peaceful demonstrators. Citizens were frequently stopped and questioned by the police on the street as in the 1970s and 1980s. The

government also refused to listen to calls to renegotiate the deal with the USA. Although the participants in the candlelight demonstration were ordinary citizens, Lee Myung-Bak criticised it as a leftist attempt to destabilise the government.⁴² Furthermore, President Lee appointed his campaign advisors to top posts at the major television stations in order to control the media. In alliance with the citizen's movement, workers within the media launched strikes in protest against the state's control over the sector. Lee ignored such protests, however, and continued to damage the independence of the media. In short, to use Zakaria's term, 'the rise of illiberal democracy' became a political fact after 25 years of democratic transition in South Korea.⁴³

Concluding remarks

Twenty-five years have passed since the military regime surrendered to the people power revolution and the democratic transition in Korea began. The Korean experience can be characterised as a negotiated transition in which the ruling party negotiated with opposition leaders while maintaining its political power. The pact between the ruling party and opposition leaders set limits to the development of democracy since it imposed the interests of political elites on the scope and nature of political reforms. While the fiercest challenge to the military regime was carried out by university students and radical political activists, they were excluded from negotiations surrounding the abolishment of authoritarian political institutions. Thus, the political negotiations between the ruling and opposition parties significantly restricted the outcome of regime change in South Korea. Popular movements such as the labour and peasant movements were also excluded from the sphere of institutionalised politics. Progressive parties were unable to participate in the new institutionalised politics, since existing parties based on strong regional antagonism among voters occupied the political space. Although workers and peasants had strong organisations, they were unable to fully mobilise the masses on behalf of the progressive parties in the elections.

Furthermore, the people power movement that successfully toppled the military regime in summer 1987 was not powerful enough to bring about regime change immediately because of the split between the opposition candidates in the presidential elections of 1987 and the failure of the democratic candidates. The conservative party was able to maintain its power for more than a decade after people power had opened up the path of democratisation. The persistence of the GNP contributed to the survival of the civic organisations that had been organised and sponsored by the former military regime. Genuine regime change did not occur until 1997, when the opposition candidate Kim Dae-jung finally defeated the GNP. However, the rule of the liberal democratic parties was short-lived and lasted for only a decade. The GNP returned to power in 2008.

In the post-crisis period, the newly elected Kim Dae-jung government implemented a set of neoliberal economic reforms under the guidance of the IMF. These reforms generated massive layoffs and increased the number of working. Despite the introduction of some welfare policies to prevent the

emergence of a widespread social crisis, the welfare programmes introduced by the Kim Dae-jung government fell short of providing a social safety net for the unemployed and irregular workers. As a result, mass disaffection with rising inequality and poverty undermined the social support of the liberal democratic governments. The conservative political party and civic organisations were consequently able to capitalise on the deteriorating social and economic condition of the people.

The extraordinary political dynamics of democratic transition in Korea challenges theories of democratic transition and consolidation in newly democratised societies. It shows that the dynamics of civil society is as important as that of the state. The conservative civic organisations established and sponsored by the military regime were able to survive and become the social basis of the conservative political mobilisation from the mid-2000s onwards. The GNP succeeded in mobilising old and new conservative civic organisations by reorganising them as the New Right Union in 2005. Consequently civil society became increasingly divided between pro-democratic and conservative civic organisations.

The drama of democratic transition in South Korea cannot be viewed as universal. Nevertheless, the analysis of the whole process of political change, though *post hoc*, provides some insights into discourses on democratic transition. As Terry L Karl puts it, 'The mode of transition sets the context within which strategic interactions take place, which in turn determines whether political democracy will emerge and survive and what type of democracy will be institutionalised'.⁴⁴ The mode of democratic transition affects longer-term processes of democratic consolidation in the newly democratised societies. While the struggle for democracy is itself an important factor in the process of democratisation, the mode of democratic transition is also important in understanding types of new political regime. In addition, democratisation of the state by regime change is not sufficient for the consolidation of democracy. The sustainability of democracy depends upon the strength of pro-democratic civic organisations in civil society.

The formation of Korea's divided civil society illustrates that we should pay more attention not only to the strength of civil society but also to different types of civil society. While a strong civil society is indispensable for democratic consolidation, a pro-democratic civil society is also important for the sustainability of newly democratised regimes. Thus, the Korean case illustrates that the politics of democratic consolidation is entirely different to the politics of an anti-authoritarian regime.

Finally, the sustainability of the newly democratised regime is threatened to the extent that the regime pursues a path of neoliberal economic reform. Such reforms present a challenge to the new government by giving rise to widespread economic hardship. Those who suffer under the process of democratisation are likely to prefer those who can potentially alleviate economic hardship. President Lee Myung-bak was an icon of new hope for the poor and the middle class. Nevertheless, Lee's failure in this regard raises the question of the extent to which they could direct their support towards the opposition party again.

Notes

- 1 The GNP has undergone various name changes and restructurings over the years. It was first established as the Democratic Republican Party by Park Chung-Hee in 1963. Chun Doo-Hwan renamed the party the Democratic Justice Party in 1980. Kim Young-Sam, a former opposition politician who had defected to the conservative camp, renamed it the Democratic Liberal Party in 1993 following a merger with two smaller parties. In 1995 it was renamed the New Korean Party and it was finally named the Grand National Party in 1997.
- 2 In the Third World, without a long tradition of liberal democracy, conservatism tends to contain authoritarian characteristics as a core element, since the conservative party restricts civil rights and mobilises repressive measures to deal with political opposition. With a long military tradition, conservative parties with various names in South Korea also have shown a strong authoritarian tendency in their political orientation.
- 3 See, among others, G O'Donnell, P Schmitter & L Whitehead (eds), *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Prospects for Democracy*, Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986; TL Karl & PC Schmitter, 'Modes of transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe', *International Social Science Journal*, 43(2), 1991, pp 269–284; and GL Munck & CS Leff, 'Modes of transition and democratization: South America and Eastern Europe in comparative perspective', *Comparative Politics*, 29(3), 1998, pp 343–362.
- 4 SK Kim, 'State and civil society in South Korea's democratic consolidation', *Asian Survey* 36(12), 1997, pp 1135–1144; and KY Shin, 'The capitalist class and democratization in South Korea', *Korean Journal of Political Economy*, 1(1), 2003, pp 131–176.
- 5 For example, JJ Choi argues that the crisis of democracy in Korea is based on its institutional failure to build political parties that are responsible and accountable. See Choi, *Democracy after Democratization*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2006.
- 6 See K Gray, 'The global uprising of labour? The Korean labour movement and neoliberal social corporatism', *Globalizations*, 5(3), 2008, pp 483–499; and KY Shin, 'Globalization and the working class in South Korea: contestation, fragmentation, and renewal', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 44(2), 2010, pp 211–229.
- 7 Theories of civil society implicitly assume that civil society is the basis of democracy. See JL Cohen & A Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Boston, MA: MIT Press, 1994; and J Keane, *Civil Society and the State: New European Perspectives*, London: Verso, 1988. Some scholars have criticised the romanticised liberal concept of civil society advocated by the early scholars on democratisation. See N Bermeo, 'Myths of moderation: confrontation and conflict during democratic transitions', *Comparative Politics*, 29(3), 1997, pp 305–322; and A Brysk, 'Democratizing civil society in Latin America', *Journal of Democracy*, 11(3), 2000, pp 151–165.
- 8 For a brief synopsis of the Kwangju uprising and massacre, see GW Shin, 'Introduction', in GW Shin & KM Hwang (eds), *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003, pp xi–xxxi; and YT Kim, *The May 18 of Kwangju*, Seoul: Yeoksagonggan, 2010.
- 9 Korea Institute of Democracy, *A History of Social Movement for Democracy*, Vol III, Seoul: Dolbegae, 2010, pp 315–340.
- 10 See C Johnson, 'Democratization of South Korea: what role does economic development play?', *Copenhagen Papers*, 4, 1989, pp 63–80; and HB Lim, *Market, State and Democracy*, Seoul: Nanam, 1994, p 286.
- 11 Korea Institute of Democracy, *A History of Social Movement for Democracy*, Vol III, pp 379–380.
- 12 When President Chun reluctantly accepted the competitive election for president, he intended to manoeuvre the conflict between Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung. To maximise the possibility of the conflict between two Kims, Chun granted special pardons to Kim Dae-jung in order to divide voters for the opposition parties. See *ibid*, pp 375–377.
- 13 JK Roh, *The Labour Regime and Social Compromise*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2008, pp 214–215; and Shin, 'Globalization and the working class in South Korea', pp 211–229.
- 14 For the details of the ideology of the labour movement in this period, see CW Kim, *The Abolition of The National Association of Workers and Korean Labour Movement*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2008; and DM Cho, *A Sociology of Working Class Formation and Democratic Labour Movement*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2011.
- 15 KY Shin, 'The capitalist class and democratization in South Korea', *Korean Journal of Political Economy*, 1(1), 2003, pp 131–176.
- 16 SK Kim, 'State and civil society in South Korea's democratic consolidation', *Asian Survey*, 36(12), 1997, pp 1135–1144.
- 17 DY Cho, 'Characteristics of differentiated social movement organizations in the 1990s', *Journal of Korean Sociology*, 30(1), 1996, pp 412–136.
- 18 JJ Choi, *Democratization of Democracy*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2006, p 33.

- 19 DC Kim, 'Growth and crisis of the Korean Citizens Movement', *Korea Journal*, 46(2), 2006, pp 99–128; HR Kim, 'The state and civil society in transition: the role of non-governmental organizations in South Korea', *Pacific Review*, 13(4), 2001, pp 595–613; KY Shin, 'The concept of civil society and the formation of civil society', *Asian Culture*, 10, 1994, pp 145–180; and PM Yoo & HK Kim, *Civil Society and Citizen's Movement*, Seoul: Hanul, 1995.
- 20 G O'Donnell & P Schmitter, 'Tentative conclusions about uncertain democracies', in O'Donnell *et al*, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*.
- 21 The majority view on the KCTU is that it represents the historical tradition of workers' struggle, from Chun's struggle, burning himself to death as a protest against repression of workers' rights, to the great workers strike of 1987. See JK Roh, *The Labour Politics and Labour Movement in Korea*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2007; and DM Cho, *The Working Class Formation and Sociology of Democratic Labour Movement*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2011. However, some scholars have criticised the KCTU for losing the workers' solidarity beyond region and industry that was the main spirit of the preceding National Association of Workers. See C W Kim, *The Abolition of the National Association of Workers and the Formation of the KCTU*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2007.
- 22 The general strike launched by the KCTU on 15 November 2006 was a failure. The strike made demands on the government to guarantee the rights of irregular workers, halt its reform of labour relations, cancel the Korea–America Free Trade Agreement, and reform the Industrial Accident Insurance. The vote for the strike was not carried out by local unions and local union members were not interested in the general strike. Although the KCTU president showed his strong will for an indefinite general strike to encourage members' participation, saying he would not run for the next election, the strike did not last more than two weeks, with low participation from union members. The only positive outcome of the general strike were the successful wage negotiations among local unions. See HT Kim, 'What will the longest general strike leave us?' *Labour & Society*, December 2006, pp 126–129.
- 23 JJ Choi (ed), *Korean Labour in Crisis: The Weakness of Social Base for Democracy*, Seoul: Humanitas, 2005.
- 24 HY Lee, 'South Korea in 2002: multiple political drama', *Asian Survey*, 43(1), 2003, pp 64–77.
- 25 The opposition parties cited three major reasons for the impeachment of Roh: violation of election laws, corruption scandals of former aides, and mismanagement of the national economy. This was the political retaliation of the majority opposition parties against Roh, who publically supported the Uri Party, the minority ruling party, one month before the general election in April 2004. The chairman of the main opposition party (GNP) announced that it would be compelled to impeach Roh unless he refrained from intervening in the general election in April 2004. As the state prosecutors investigated illegal campaign funds of the GNP, that party and the minor opposition party NMDP colluded to impeach Roh. R Kim, 'Roh impeached for election law violation, corruption scandal', *Korea Times*, 12 March 2004.
- 26 MY Kim, 'What did anti-impeachment movement leave to us?', *Citizens and the World*, 10, 2004, pp 151–174.
- 27 MN Lee, *Ideologies of Conservatives and Progressives*, Seoul: Jisungsa, 2010, pp 179–180.
- 28 SH Chung, 'A comparative analysis of neo-con in America and new right in Korea: focus on the formation development process of policy idea, network and policy', *Korea Political Science Review*, 42(3), 2008, pp 167–189.
- 29 DY Kim, 'A study on the mechanism of Park Chung Hee regime's state-mobilization: focus on the New Community Movement', *Economy and Society*, 61, 2004, pp 176–177; and JD Park & DH Han, 'New Community Movement and Yushin regime', *Critique of History*, 47, 1999, pp 43–36.
- 30 SW Nam argues that the summit meeting provoked massive reactions from conservative blocs. See Nam, *A Study of Conservatives in South Korea*, Seoul: Nanam, 2006, pp 510–516.
- 31 Citizens United for Better Society, *Declaration*, Seoul, 2002.
- 32 The Seoul city government provided US\$10 000 for the organization's food expenses. SB Son, 'Seoul metropolitan government supported Korea Parent Federation with tax money', *Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 27 September 2011; and YJ Chu, 'Conservative churches provided ten thousand dollars for the organization to confront the strike in Hanjin Heavy Industry', *Kyunghyang Newspaper*, 30 August 2011.
- 33 Chung, 'A comparative analysis of neo-con in America and new right in Korea'.
- 34 Several policy failures were observed in housing and the labour market, resulting in the worsening of economic hardship of the poor and lower middle class. For more comprehensive research on the issue, see SO Kang (ed), *Diagnosis and Responses to Economic and Social Polarization*, Seoul: Korea Institute for Health and Social Affairs, 2007.
- 35 MJ Yun, 'The rise of the new right and activation of the conservatives', *Citizens and the World*, 13, 2008, pp 46–65; and MN Lee, *Ideologies of Conservatives and Regressives*, Seoul: Jisungsa, 2011.
- 36 The Sunshine policy of the Kim Dae-jung government and its continuation during the Roh government was criticised for helping North Korea rather than undermining it.

- 37 HJ Lim & JH Jang, 'Neo-liberalism in post-crisis South Korea: social conditions and outcomes', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 36(4), 2006, pp 442–263; KY Shin, 'Globalization and social inequality in South Korea', in J Song (ed), *New Millennium Korea*, London: Routledge, 2010, pp 11–28; and JY Park & JS Mah, 'Neo-liberal reform and bipolarisation of income in Korea', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 41(2), 2011, pp 249–265.
- 38 Almost 44% of those who voted for Roh Moo-hyun in 2002 voted for Lee Myung-bak in the presidential election in 2007. See KY Shin, 'Voters wanted to solve the livelihood of the people', *Hankyoreh*, 2 January 2008, p 4.
- 39 The 30 largest corporations have enjoyed a 73.3% increase in profits between 2007 and 2010. With the reduction of the corporate tax rate from 26.3% to 19.4% from 2007, they were able to save almost \$8.2 billion. YR Hwang, 'Only 10 percent increase of jobs, while 73 percent increase of corporate profit', *Hankyoreh Newspaper*, 3 April 2011.
- 40 There have been diverse interpretations of the protests against beef imports from the USA. Some consider them an expression of anti-neoliberalism. See SO Lee, JL Kim & J Wright, 'Mad cow militancy: neoliberal hegemony and social resistance in South Korea', *Political Geography*, XXX, 2010, pp 1–11; and NH Kang, 'The politics of candlelight and neo-liberalism: tasks and choices of the left in Korea', in ST Hong (ed), *The Candlelight Demonstration and Korean Society*, Seoul: Munhwakwahaksa, 2009, pp 95–126. Others see them as an eruption of anti-authoritarianism directed at President Lee. See, for example, KS Cho, 'The ideological orientation of 2008 candlelight vigil participants: anti-American, pro-North Korean left or anti-neoliberalism?', *Korean Political Science Review*, 43(3), 2009, pp 235–265.
- 41 An internet community such as Agora, with a portal site 'Daum' provides a new possibility for deliberative democracy through the role of the cyber community or collective intelligence of the cyber community. See ST Hong, 'The candlelight demonstration and democracy', *Economy and Society*, 80, 2010, pp 10–39.
- 42 See KY Ko & HJ Song, 'Protest using the internet, political participation and its democratic implications: the case of the 2008 candlelight protest in Korea', *Democracy and Human Rights*, 10(3), pp 233–269.
- 43 F Zakaria, 'The rise of illiberal democracy', *Foreign Affairs*, 76(6), 1996, pp 22–43.
- 44 KT Lynn, 'Dilemmas of democratization in Latin America', *Comparative Politics*, 23(1), 1990, p 8.

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