

# SOUTH KOREA: A PROGRESSIVE DISCOURSE ON THE CONTRIVE IN TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** By December 2002, South Korea elected the fourth president since transition to procedural democracy in 1987. On May 9, 2017, the 19<sup>th</sup> presidential election was held. The significance of these elections to the global community is that South Korea has made a progressive transition to a commendable democracy. Critical as South Korea had experienced frequent military involvement in politics (coup d'états), dictatorship, political repression and uprising between 1961 and 1987 (same period of the 'Korean Miracle'). The Pre-1987 days of military involvement in the political process were characterized by; usurpation of power by an incumbent president, financial misconduct and corruption. These issues impede democracy and economic development. This paper seeks to explore Korea's economic success (1962-1980) amid struggle for transitional democracy to finally emerge among the 'Four Asian Tigers' with undeniable evidence of economic development. The paper will attempt to answer the question of what transformed South Korea's struggle for democratic transition into a globally acclaim economic development.

## INTRODUCTION

Echoes of egalitarianism brought anticipation for universal suffrage (the right of almost all adults to vote in political elections usually 18 or 21 who satisfy the

requirements established by law). This was not only a global 'wind of change' against the global crises of the 60s; it was also a substantive political move in the Republic of Korea towards transitional democracy after the Korean War of June 25, 1950 to July 27, 1953 (when North Korea invaded South Korea).

Heightened constant political reforms suggested that neither the corporatist nor the bureaucratic authoritarian models were applicable in Korea (Cotton, 1989).

Korea's 'non-democratic past could be seen as a response to specific factors; Korea's position in the prevailing world system, the absence of countervailing elites as a result of war, rapid social transformation and the development of a strong and relatively independent state' (ibid, 1989).

Meanwhile, emerging contention liaised on popular demands for political reform. The willingness of the privilege elites to recognize them was looked upon as the likely consequences of modernization.

Therefore, elements of political culture and the contentious legacy of the past emerged with new challenges. In similar sentiment, Cotton (1989) argues; 'liberal democrat like Roh Tae-woo (1988-1993) will need to be seen to be making a new beginning if the perennial legitimacy crisis of the Korean republic is to be overcome.' Imminently, this criss-cross at a time President Chun Doo-Whan attempted to withhold the constitutional debate which catalyzes an organic response from Korea citizenry appearing as the June 10<sup>th</sup> mass uprising to contend authoritarianism/authoritarian forms of government (Ahn, 1993).

Imperative to note that Korea's struggle for democracy and political movement is

intertwined in the gross development of modern Korea. The concessive June 29<sup>th</sup> Declaration to accept the people demands by Roh Tae-Woo in 1987 was a milestone in the democratic process (ibid, 1993). Therefore, to understanding the contrive in transitional democracy and economic development of Korea, one need to;

## **REVISIT KOREA PRE AND DURING PERIODS OF DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION**

After the end of WWII (1945), Korea was one of the epicenters in the Cold War politics (1947–1991). The fact that the Soviet troops had stationed in North Korea, and South Korea was surrounded by communist China was enough ‘head-ache’ to the U.S. capitalist propaganda machinery which then stationed troops in the South as a counter measures against communist expansionism from either China or the USSR.

In less than two years after Korean independence in August 1948; the Korean War broke out. It was a bloody three-year war which ended in a truce.

Despite the end of the war, ideological contestation between the United States and Russia still continued to further dividing North and South Korea via a demilitarized zone where American troops are stationed. The technical implication is that the war between capitalism and communism still continues as a paradigm shift.

The aftermath of the 1953 truce, the U.S. pumped money into South Korea to encourage its growth, and make sure it remains loyalist to its capitalist propaganda. It

was of utmost importance to make Korea economically strong to stand up against forces of communism. Hence, there was unsubstantial focus on building democracy and democratic institutions by U.S. As a consequence, the growth of Korea's economy became linked to nationalism (a form of 'ethnic pride').

But unfortunately, the remiss to building democracy in Korea by the United States opened up for 'dictatorship' since politics leaves no vacuum (political conditions cannot be void).

Nonetheless, by October 1979, the atmosphere was ripe for transition into democracy. 'The contentment of two decades of stunning economic growth was short lived by the plunge toward a recession that began there after (Adesnik & Kim, 2008).

The labor unions commanded mass protests with wave of strikes and public demonstrations. They were joined by irate students who invaded the streets. Their numbers increased as a coincidence to the multiple universities created during the era of rapid economic growth. Also, the creed (church) that existed as 'antipodal social capital' was the last to join the motion and lent the labor unions their relentless support. Finally, at a later stage, the workers, students and clergymen/church were joined by the parliamentary opposition who had maintained a certain prestige in spite of negligible power under the dictatorship of Park Chung Hee (ibid, 2008).

The United States which customarily was benign to Parks dictatorship because of stability in Korea, controversially resented Park because of; his many human rights violations and his apparent attempt to bribe American legislators (ibid, 2008). This was a turning point in the 'democratic move' as;

Park's dictatorship came under extreme political pressure and attacks which ceded into intense internal divisions; 'hard-liners called for the use of force and soft-liners advocated a measure of compromise with the protesters (win-win) (ibid, 2008). The prolong division culminated in the assassination of Park by his own intelligence chief. The reins of power were then passed to a provisional government that committed itself to democratic elections and the protection of civil liberties.

Yet six months along the line, Gen. Chun Doo Hwan, a protégé of Park, violently consolidated his control of the government, ushering in another seven years of dictatorship which took the form of regime extension instead of regime change. This angered the people and in June 1987, Chun Doo Hwan was found in a similar situation that Adesnik & Kim (2008) argues familiar to Park.

The labor unrest was on the rise. Student protests had become widespread and increasingly violent. Church leaders started and insistently preached that democracy was a moral obligation. The parliamentary opposition also advocated for free and fair elections.

Meanwhile, unlike Park, Chun had a few advantages. The economy was growing by 'leaps and bounds', approximately more than ten percent per year. His regime was solid and united without prospect of any internal faction.

In addition, Chun had made progress into the 'heart' of President Reagan, who hosted him in White House in 1985.

But none of these advantages extricated Chun. He surrendered to the protesters' demand for 'free and fair elections' and for the restoration of civil liberties that was

jettison by the dictatorial hegemony of Park. Suffrage therefore remained the unique escape route amidst the violent protests. In December 1987, after a vigorous campaign, the elections took place.

It is now more than two decades that 'free and fair' election is taking place as scheduled in Korea. Huntington (1991) argues 'civil liberties have also become a fixture, although room for improvement remains'. The country is henceforth classified as a transparent democracy.

The contour which ushered a democratic culture of 'one man- one vote' in the context of the 'people shall govern' meaning by elected representatives replicated. This grew in Korea until the opposition government also could ascend the highest office without chaos (Huntington, 1991). This is commendable because anti-development factors existed in Korea. For example, at some point, the nation had about six constitutions in less than five decades, and in which no president had left office peacefully before democratization took place in 1987.

Diamond and Shin (2000:1) argues that, 'the last two decades have marked a period of unprecedented democratic continuity and political stability. Such attributes have invited international observers to labeling South Korea as 'the most powerful democracy in East Asia after Japan.' The victory of the opposition over the incumbent party and, above all, the turnover of the presidency in 1998 seem to indicate that Korean democracy has attained full maturity (ibid, 2000:3). This therefore ushers us to understanding democracy and the development of Korea.

## **DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN KOREA**

Re-imagining how the politics of the ‘Cold War’ shaped the East and the West, and their allies and protégés in terms of democracy and economic development. Democracy and development did not always go hand in hand in South Korea like elsewhere.

In Mackenzie (1906) - ‘The Dangers of Democracy’, there are claims that democracy is economically inefficient, politically idealistic, dysfunctional, morally corrupt or simply suboptimal socio-politically. Hence, anti-democracy sentiment hoofs across borders in Asia; China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos etc. All, to having imprints of communism were enemies of capitalism. Since capitalism lobbied in democracy and communism are two contending political forces.

For, propagandists’ narratives of ‘democracy (capitalist democracy) and communism (social)’ political systems are based on very opposing credo/principles. Even though superficially both attempt to share the ‘power to the people’ philosophy, in reality both systems of government govern the socio-economic and political fabric of society in markedly opposing ways.

For example, economically, communism calls for the government to take control of the entire capital and instruments of production (industries) in the country in an effort to getting rid of economic inequality. While democracy respects individuals' right to own property and privately own and manage the factors of production (land,

labor, capital and entrepreneur). Hence, I will argue that the later capitalist motivation of democracy could probably stem from the 'social construct' of 'homo economicus', or 'economic man'. A concept in economic theories which portray humans as consistently rational and narrowly self-interested agents who usually pursue their subjectively-defined ends optimally.

In addition, the political landscape also differs in democracy and communism. In democracy people are free to create their own political parties and contest in elections, which must be free and fair to all contestants. In communism, the government is controlled by a single political party and any political dissent or indecency is not tolerated.

Socially, in capitalism class distinctions are an acceptable culture. While communism frowns at, and attempts to eliminate all class distinctions; everyone is considered both the owners of the means of production and their own employees.

Needless to say, the presence of the United States in Korea was a force en route capitalism (democracy).

## **THE STATE OF KOREA'S ECONOMY**

Korea's economy then could be described as a 'dementia economy' as shown in the below paragraph (Yoo, 2008).

By 1953, the GNP of Korea was around \$2,000 million, and per capita GNP was \$134.

Korea was indeed a war-torn, poor country left in ruins after the Korean War. The government channeled its efforts on post-war reconstruction in reconstruction. This



was an inevitable desideratum in order to properly invest the aids received from abroad (ibid, 2008).

Although basic re-construction was achieved by the late '50s, the economic situation did not improve much (ibid 2008). As a result, the economic environment in the early 1960s' never differed from that of most underdeveloped countries today. The per capita GNP was lowered to \$80 at a time when the cold war politics was at 'apogee'. The 'Cuban Missile crisis' also had stolen the focus of the U.S. government.

Kim (1991) argues that 'only about 30% of the land area was cultivable and the arable land per farm household ranks among the lowest in the world (currently less than a hectare).

The Japanese colonial rule that existed (before 1960)- from 1910 to 1945 also brought exploitation and modernization capable to altering the country's future course of development. The little infrastructures built under such colonial rule were even destroyed during the Korean War (ibid 1991).

The backlash was that economic growth rate stoop very low at 1.1%. The industrial structure became typical to that of underdeveloped economies. This affected the country's per capita income which became lower than that of Haiti, Ethiopia, and Yemen and about 40% below India's (ibid 1991). With such a low-level income, domestic savings became negligible.

And contrary, the population growth of nearly 3% a year in an already densely populated country meant that the country had to depend on foreign aid for sheer survival. Unemployment, underemployment and poverty were widespread with over

40% of the nation's population suffering from absolute poverty. It was evident capitalism had done little for South Korea.

The agricultural sector that captured about 40% of GNP was basically subsistence in nature (Kim, 1991), while the manufacturing sector that captured 13-4% never enjoy 'economic of scale'.

The inadequacy of infrastructure as said earlier was a stumbling block to economic development; the stock of the road was about 27,000km, the electricity production was 1512 GWh. Natural resources such as iron ore, coal, etc. were very scanty. All these stood as tangible obstacles for economic development in South Korea. But how did South Korea turned the tides amid these entire economic bulwark into economic development/miracle?

Many scholars have attempted to analyze Korea's economic development experience. Looking back to moving forward consider it a developmental state at some point, but without consensus on what triggers its success. Neither could they settle on policies pursued in Korea nor existing aid as the gear.

Meanwhile, Korea still remains a lesson for other nations struggling to achieve rapid economic growth (Kim, 2002).

Some economists and development analysts have tried to copy the 'South-Korean Essentials', - 'an extremely complex concept involving multiple factors that create together the targeted effect. The idea of complexity is not limited to density of causes for a certain development, but it underlines the possibility of its true independence (CEREQ 1988).'

Thus, Bailey, Zitzewitz, Bosworth, Westphal (1998) in support of Kim (2002) argue that 'East Asia must be used as an example to understand how other countries could achieve more rapidly convergent economic development.

Lee (1999) on the other hand, argues that; 'at the heart of this dramatic emergence of the miraculous economy of Korea, three crucial factors coincided; First, the rapid expansion of world trade; second, a strong interventionist state determined to pursue export-oriented economic growth; and third, the availability of a high-quality, low-cost labor force (ibid, 1999).'

In other words, 'there exist certain basic issues with which any independent development process is confronted with, regardless of its particular trends such as;

- the state and market roles in the national and international economic policies
- the issue of role and restructuring inter-field efficacy, mainly between agriculture and industry
- the issue of maximization of surplus which can be invested, including the role of foreign capital
- creating a national technological capacity
- legitimacy of a development project to the social sectors who will bear the effect or sustain the efforts (ibid, 1999)

Chadwick (2005) rather argues that; 'ICT-driven economic development inclusive of other progressive factors such as; relatively high GDP per capita (about US\$ 9000 in 2001, according to the World Bank), and high literacy rates of over 95% is the main success of Korea's economic development. 'And the fact that South Korea pursued

democracy opened the country to foreign trade and trade liberalization (e.g. it liberalized the telecommunications sector).

Coincidentally, this was strengthened by a history of pro-active industrial policy with an existing market (70% of Korea's 50 million populations live in urban areas) (ibid, 2005).' The implication is that 'Korea has both foreign and domestic markets available for ICT products and services. Its population enjoys a degree of disposable income. And its citizens were highly literate capable of using and finding uses for information technologies, as well as a business community that is engaged in global trade and is exposed to evolving ICT business practices (ibid 2005).'

In a nutshell, the effect of ICTs on Korea's economy as argued by Chadwick is fourfold as ICTs and the digital revolution create:

- New industries and economic sectors or sub-sectors (e.g. the software industry, cell phones, computers and peripherals).
- New ways of doing business (e.g. e-commerce, globally distributed organizations, integrated supply chains).
- New tasks and opportunities for government (e.g. e-government, privacy policy legislation, ICT industrial policy).
- New issues in economic and political development (e.g. availability of information access, computer literacy, the digital divide).

Probably, the unintended consequences of ICTs and digital revolution on economic growth, social capital, and political development in Korea goes beyond the numerical

contribution of the ICT sector to national GDP. 'ICTs sparked efficiency and productivity in other economic processes, such as in the distribution of economic gains and basic services, heightened transparency and accountability of the government (ibid 2005).'

In Lee (2001), Lee expounded further on the root cause of economic development in Korea pointing to the 'high savings and investment ratios, well-educated labor force and well-directed export-oriented development strategies as primary factors (ibid, 2001).'

However, Labor force/human capital seems to be the key point because not only that Chadwick (2005) mention it, if mathematically put, all other factors are sub linear to human capital because the gross outcome of all the other factors attesting to economic growth/development solely depend on the efficiency of labor (ibid,2005).'

Therefore to Lee (2001), 'educational attainment should be considered the main component of human development'. This however opposes the Human Development Report of Sagar & Najam (1998), which 'emphasizes two sides of human development; the formation of human capabilities - such as improved health, knowledge, and skills - and people's use of these acquired capabilities for economic and social purposes.' Meaning human development should be thought of more broadly than either education attainment or capital formation (ibid, 1998).

Unfortunately, vis-à-vis international reputation as amongst the fastest growing economies, Korea's remarkable achievement in human development is little known or under-explore. To understanding how Korea achieved its rapid economic development

in the attempt of attributing the 'glories of economic miracle' as the result of competent labor force, one need to understand the intricate nature of economic development and human development. These interacted with each other in the Korean economy. Therefore, to getting a vivid analogy; one should possibly revisit or rethink Korea as a society.

## **REVISITING KOREAN SOCIETY**

Korean society originally was traditional, feudalistic, agrarian, and isolated from the West until the late nineteenth century. Hunter (2012) describes Feudalistic society as 'one governed by those eligible through birthright, relationships with the favored and landed gentry.' In other words, Feudalism can be seen as 'a grant of land, the sharing of power and privilege in return for favor and loyalty, and a structuring of society with well-defined layers where each layer forms a sub-culture.'

To expounding further, Hunter (2012) argues 'feudalism is an affliction upon humankind, akin to apartheid and slavery. The nature of feudalism inhibits people, communities, and nations from making the necessary transformation within economy and society that will ensure escape from the shackles of poverty, to survival with dignity outside the envelop of ignorance that prevents emergence into an aspired place within the world community (ibid, 2012).'

Feudalism came to Korea under Japanese colonial rule. A concept which was extended

to Shogunate (Japan), parts of Africa, the kingdoms of the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America, South America, and to the 'Malay' archipelago (Nusantara) around 1185 CE to 1868 CE (Brown,1974). 'It was a deeply ambivalent experience for Koreans. For, the first ten years, Japan ruled directly through the military, and any Korean dissent was ruthlessly crushed (ibid, 1974).'

Agrarianism was a natural social construct in Korea which existed far before feudalism (1600 – 1910). Uttam (2014) argues in agrarianism, 'the aristocracy had access to most of the agricultural surplus, leaving farmers destitute.' It thus became worst during late Joseon period (1700–1910). There was the rise of 'centralized bureaucratic monarchy that created a class of scholar- officials – 'the Yangbans' – who were critical to providing bottom-up political-economic and administrative support. The later gained access and controlled most of the land in the countryside.' Even 'when the forces of modernization, industrialization and commercialization took the world by storm, Korea's longest-serving dynasty - the Joseon took refuge in isolationist policies and could not incorporate modern ways to organize the nation's socioeconomic and political structures. The grip of the Yangban class was so profound that powerful political, economic and technological forces could not stimulate change.' This left the people disempowered (ibid, 2014).

## **HOW KOREA BECAME A PROGRESSIVE SOCIETY**

Unlike in Africa where you have new states but old societies, Korea could be considered 'a new state and a new society' if compare to countries like the United States that existed as a nation for over 241 years after it independence in 1776.

The Koreans worked hard to improve the quality of their democracy which contributed to development. They started by promoting the rule of law, accountability, control of corruption, freedom, and responsiveness which made the government more effective. They were hyper motivated after 1987 elections with the general consensus that a return to the frequent military intrude in politics is impossible. The military has become highly professional and dismisses all allegation of possible military coup.

The processes of universal suffrages was then firmly entrenched in Korean society with a growing expectation that campaigns are fairly run or at least with increasingly less visible corruption.

Political parties though still vulnerable to dominance by party leadership due to lack of ideological distinction, still remain strong considering political parties' as suitable legitimate voices to articulating political demands/reforms. Up to the point of maturing democracy, there remain a relentless longing by civic groups and individual citizens for fair and responsive leadership.

Civic activism keeps playing its role in identifying and isolating corrupt and incompetent politicians within the system. Recently, on March 10 2017, President Parks Geun-hye was disposed due to sentiments of corruption – impeachment. Before, prominent businessmen and sons of former presidents as well have been prosecuted for embezzlement and political corruption. Several politicians have been removed



from office as well. Military Generals also have been removed from political processes.

In relation to the rule of law, significant attention is devoted to reducing violence by enhancing regulatory equality.

However, regarding accountability, control of corruption, and transparency, Koreans have gained a 'new consciousness'. This 'form of consciousness' in what I paraphrase as 'Koreanism' helped the nation to better analyze their struggle for 'democratization' which helps to improve the quality of their democracy. This determination helped Korea to quickly adapting to the changing economic environment and to sustaining its economic growth.

Furthermore, social and economic polarization was a subsequent demand for more and better welfare services. As there is no such thing as a 'utopia', there is no single 'one-size-fits-all' model of society that can be held up as the 'golden society' for economic development.

But, there is a strong consensus on the role and significance of effective, accountable, and inclusive participation of any society intending to promote sustainable and equitable development.

Reflecting back, when nation-building started in North Korea after August 1945 under the Soviet auspices; the Americans in the south were still ill-prepared (Stueck & Yi, 2010). They chose an indirect military control base on a 'patronage design', which ushered them to recognizing the indigenous 'people's committees,' which had sprung up as branches of the Seoul-based Committee for the Preparation of Korean

Independence (CPKI). The later introduced prevalent corruption as said earlier which functions as a setback to the democratic development. But was confronted without 'mercy' and dealt with accordingly by Korean citizenry.

Corruption in the public sector became of concern to government, politicians and citizenry responsibility after 1987. The National Assembly also attempting to eliminate corruption superficially was encouraging. This triggered a 'political will' among lawmakers since they are in the position to operate sound mechanism for controlling corruption.

## CONCLUSION

It is surprising to see that South Korea's lack of democracy during military involvement in politics and dictatorship ended up being the road-way to economic development.

The military coup in 1961 that brought General Park Chung Hee into power as an authoritarian leader, implemented a 'martial law' to rule the country. This helped in initiating a five year economic development plan from which South Korea's miracle was triggered with remarkable economic growth thereafter.

Also, Park's strong central government started shaping coherent economic policies and strategies without much interference. And the turning point of the birth of 'Korianism' (a strong civic consciousness capable to deterring all forms of corruption

and nepotism) became the 'will' of the people. Just like the expression, 'where there is a will, there is a way', the people were very determined. While economic policies were re-shaping, the people invested in their human development. This made it possible for federations such as the Federation of Korean Industries to be formed by 1963. It helped the biggest companies to work with the government to plan the economy. Thus 'Koreanism' (determination) and human capital is the bedrock for democratic transition and economic development in South Korea.

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