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SOUTH KOREA'S MIRACULOUS DEMOCRACY

Hahm Chaibong

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On 19 December 2007, the people of South Korea chose Lee Myung Bak as their next president. The victory was a decisive one, with Lee, the opposition candidate, winning 49 percent of the vote (11.5 million) against ruling-party candidate Chung Dong Young, who won only 26 percent (6.2 million). The five-million-vote margin was by far the largest in the five presidential elections since Korea's transition to democracy in 1987. Lee's victory marked the triumphant return to power of the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) and brought to an end a decade of rule by progressives, who had elected two consecutive presidents, Kim Dae Jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo Hyun (2003–2008).

The conservatives cemented their victory by winning the majority in the National Assembly election on 9 April 2008. Winning 153 out of 299 seats, the GNP gave the president a majority in the legislature with which to push through his national agenda. If one counts the splinter far-right party led by Lee Hoi Chang, who had been the GNP's presidential candidate in 1997 and 2002, as well as those conservative members who won as independents, the conservative majority in the legislature becomes overwhelming. This was a dramatic comeback for a party that was on the brink of extinction in 2004 after its stunning defeat in that year's National Assembly election in reaction to the impeachment of then-president Roh Moo Hyun (who was subsequently reinstated by the Constitutional Court).

The significance of the recent elections, however, goes beyond shifts in the political wind and the ideological preferences of the South Korean electorate. These elections were a watershed in the development of South Korean democracy. In many ways, they symbolize the moment

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when South Korea's democracy came to full maturation, the moment that it became consolidated. What "consolidation" means, of course, depends on whether one takes a "minimalist" or "maximalist" position, and is also heavily dependent on how one chooses to define democracy.[1]

Highlighting four key developments, I argue that South Korea's democracy is consolidated in the maximalist sense—that it has come to acquire "widespread, robust legitimacy among the mass public."[2] The first major development is that the turnovers of power during the past two decades have enabled all major political figures, factions, and parties to take turns governing the country, making them "responsible stakeholders." Second, the successful inclusion within the system of leftists and progressives has broadened the ideological spectrum, making it more flexible, open, and liberal. Third, "elite pact-making" between various political factions and figures, decried at the time as "unprincipled" and "undemocratic," actually contributed to smooth transitions between governments with radically different ideological orientations. Finally, even major internal and external shocks contributed to the consolidation of the democratic system each time they were successfully overcome.

In 2007, South Korea's per-capita income topped the US$20,000 mark, and its economy was the thirteenth-largest in the world. Considering that as late as the early 1960s the country was one of the world's poorest, with a per-capita income of less than $100, South Korea's achievements seem miraculous. But throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, when the country's economy was the fastest-growing anywhere, many analysts doubted whether the development was genuine.[3] When the 1997 Asian financial crisis hit, many of those doubters felt vindicated. But the Asian economies, including South Korea's, not only quickly recovered, they embarked on a path of innovation and improved efficiency, both essential for genuine economic growth. Today few would balk at calling South Korea's economic development miraculous.

South Korea's democratic development has faced even greater skepticism. To be sure, the country's transition to democracy twenty years ago was hailed as an important part of the "third wave." Yet although South Korea has succeeded in establishing democracy in the procedural sense by holding regular, free, and fair elections, few if any have been willing to pronounce its democracy fully consolidated. Given a number of alarming events that have taken place since the transition in 1987, this is perhaps not surprising.

The past two decades have been fraught with periodic political convulsions and wild ideological and policy swings, accompanied by massive and often violent student and worker demonstrations—all of which have conveyed the impression of a democracy that was deeply unsettled, even out of control. External shocks (such as the Asian financial crisis), domestic ideological disputes (over the contentious "sunshine policy"

toward North Korea, for example), and the constitutional crisis over the National Assembly's 2004 impeachment of President Roh Moo Hyun, had seemed to stretch the young democracy to the limit.

But it was not just critical events that threatened democratic consolidation. Authoritarianism was deeply ingrained in Korean political culture, as reflected both in the imperial nature of the presidency and in the political parties, which were lorded over by party bosses and more akin to personal entourages than to public institutions. Moreover, the fractious nature of the polity found expression in a virulent regionalism that often degenerated into primitive identity politics. And rampant corruption emerged from a political system and a public long accustomed to political expediency based on personalism and cronyism rather than agreed-upon procedures and the rule of law.

Thus until very recently, critics have been giving South Korean democracy low marks for consolidation. Doh C. Shin, in his 1999 book on South Korean democracy, concluded that "the consolidation of democratic political structure[s] has advanced neither quickly nor steadily."[4] The following year, Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim noted that South Korea's "political institutions remain shallow and immature, unable to structure a meaningful choice of policy courses and to provide the responsiveness, accountability, and transparency expected by the South Korean public."[5]

Even after 2002, which saw the election of the younger, more progressive Roh Moo Hyun, critics such as Hyug Baeg Im still maintained that South Korean democracy was "faltering" and suffering from an "imperial presidency, oligarchic parties, divisive regionalism, political corruption and the people's low trust in politics."[6] When the National Assembly impeached the president, one U.S. observer opined, "The spectacle of Roh's impeachment puts paid to any notion that South Korea's constitutional democracy has grown sturdy and unshakeable roots."[7] And the criticism kept coming, with theorist Choi Jang Jip remarking in 2005 that not only was South Korean politics elite-dominated but political opposition was near impossible,[8] and Sanmook Lee declaring that the government's failure to institutionalize "democratic norms or rules in terms of political society, civil society, economic society, and the state apparatus" made it "difficult to say that Korean democracy has officially consolidated."[9]

Despite the setbacks, shortcomings, and crises, however, and despite the negative consensus among observers across the ideological spectrum, South Korean democracy today stands as a towering achievement. What then is the basis for claiming that South Korea's democracy is now fully consolidated?

Everyone Is a Stakeholder Now

With Lee Myung Bak's 2007 victory, the reins of power passed to the opposition for the second time since the transition to democracy

TABLE—KOREAN PRESIDENTS SINCE 1980

PRESIDENT	TERM	PARTY
Chun Doo Hwan	1980–88	Democratic Justice Party (DJP)
Roh Tae Woo	1988–93	DJP/Democratic Liberal Party (DLP)
Kim Young Sam	1993–98	DLP
Kim Dae Jung	1998–2003	New National Party/ Millenium Democratic Party (MDP)
Roh Moo Hyun	2003–2008*	MDP/Uri
Lee Myung Bak	2008–Present	Grand National Party

**From 13 March to 13 May 2004, Prime Minister Goh Kun served as acting president when the National Assembly impeached President Roh. Roh was reinstated two months later by a ruling of the Constitutional Court.*

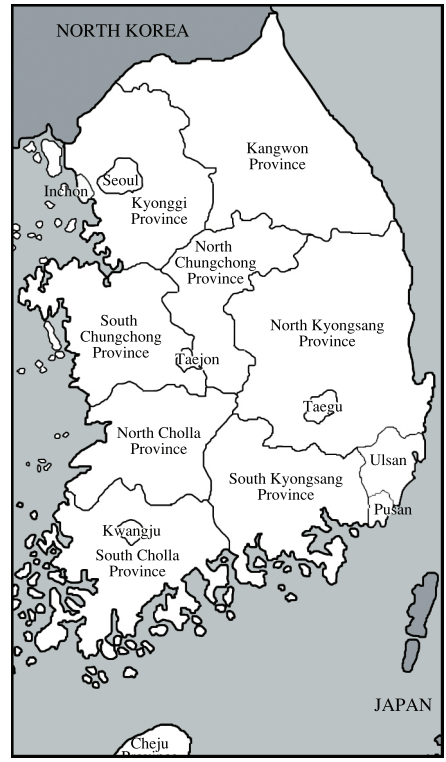
in 1987. After two consecutive progressive governments, the conservatives, in power during the first decade after the transition, came to rule again.[10] Upon closer look, however, this was clearly more than a simple alternation of power. With these transfers of office, all the major players in South Korean politics have taken turns governing the country—adversaries and longtime dissidents Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, who struggled valiantly for democracy against authoritarian regimes, as well as the radical leftists and pro–North Korean "386 generation" (a term coined to denote those in their 30s who went to college during the 1980s and were born in the 1960s), who spearheaded violent uprisings against the military-backed governments.

Kim Young Sam, first elected to the National Assembly in 1954, became a leader of the prodemocracy movement after Park Chung Hee took power in 1961 through a military coup. During the early 1970s, the Park regime grew increasingly autocratic and repeatedly jailed Kim Young Sam, put him under house arrest, and expelled him from the National Assembly. This last move sparked massive antigovernment protests in the southeastern coastal cities of Pusan and Masan, Kim Young Sam's political base, which led to the demise of Park's regime. Park's downfall was followed by another military coup and a new autocrat, Chun Doo Hwan. Kim Young Sam continued to fight for democracy, often under house arrest.

Kim Dae Jung rose to national prominence in 1969, when he narrowly defeated Kim Young Sam to become the New Democratic Party's presidential candidate against Park. Park, who was able to run only by forcing a constitutional amendment to allow for a third term, eked out a win by a razor-thin margin. This was stunning, given that the incumbent could freely deploy the police, the army, and the intelligence agency in the service of his campaign. But Kim Dae Jung nevertheless nearly swept the major cities, including Seoul and Pusan. After Park dissolved the legislature and imposed a dictatorship, Kim Dae Jung appealed to

the international community for help in toppling Park. Because of his efforts, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) kidnapped and nearly killed him. Then, in 1980, Chun's "New Military" government tried Kim Dae Jung and sentenced him to death for sedition and treason. He was eventually spared thanks to U.S. intervention.

MAP—SOUTH KOREA'S REGIONS



Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung both later assumed high office and ruled for five years each as imperial presidents. Most would have predicted that they would have been lucky to spend their lives in the opposition or in exile abroad. Instead, by attaining the presidency, they and their cohorts became part of the elite, not only exercising power but also gaining invaluable experience in running the government and acquiring a sense of responsibility to, and ownership of, the country.

For example, the election of Kim Young Sam gave the people of his regional base, South Kyongsang Province (with Pusan as its political and economic center), a stake in the country's future. During Kim Young Sam's administration, the so-called PK (Pusan–South Kyongsang) Mafia wrested control of the government and national bureaucracy from the TK (Taegu–North Kyongsang) Mafia, which had dominated the country during all the military-backed administrations going back to Park.

Kim Dae Jung's time in office, which directly followed Kim Young Sam's term, did much the same for the people of the North and South Cholla provinces. Until Kim Dae Jung became president, the southwestern region of the country had been left out of the rapid industrialization process, and its people had been widely discriminated against and largely excluded from leadership positions in government and industry. At last, during Kim Dae Jung's tenure, there was a massive influx of people from the Cholla region into the centers of power—political, economic, and social. Although the process was so overt that there was a reaction against it, the people of Cholla finally became responsible stakeholders in a system from which they had long felt alienated. By bringing this

hitherto-underprivileged region into the fold, the system gained a legitimacy and stability that it had lacked.

While Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung expanded regional inclusion in South Korea, Roh Moo Hyun, Kim Dae Jung's successor, cemented the political coming-of-age of a new generation. During the 1980s, at the height of strongman Chun Doo Hwan's rule, the students of the 386 generation were the best organized and most fierce opponents of the military-backed government. As their struggle grew bloodier, their ideology became more radical. Espousing a potent blend of leftist class ideology and fierce nationalism, the 386 generation opposed the very foundations of South Korea, a capitalist developmental state and "client" of the United States.

The radical student leaders began to join the political mainstream during Kim Dae Jung's presidency in the late 1990s. The unexpected election of Kim Dae Jung, the quintessential outsider and 386 icon, gave these radicals enough confidence in the political system finally to join it and try to reform it from within. Kim Dae Jung's inner circle, however, still comprised loyalists from his dissident days, almost all of them hailing from the Cholla region.

Roh Moo Hyun's main power base, on the other hand, was firmly rooted in the 386 generation, who ran his campaign and then formed the core of his administration. As a result, the political system received an infusion of new blood from a new generation of progressive leaders. These new leaders had once been enemies of the system—enemies that just as easily could have ossified into perennial foes. Instead, the system was able to successfully incorporate them into its fold.

Expanding the Ideological Spectrum

Before Kim Dae Jung's election, communism and socialism were considered anathema to South Korea's political and ideological identity. The Korean War and a subsequent purge of leftists in the South had turned the country into a reactionary state that considered acceptable only the narrowest spectrum of rightist ideologies. Thus Kim Dae Jung's advocacy of a welfare system brought upon him charges of leftism, and his espousal of a reconciliation policy with North Korea subjected him to accusations of procommunist sympathies.

When Kim Dae Jung came to power in the wake of the 1997 financial crisis, he began applying the policies that he had long been advocating, first as a dissident and then as an opposition politician. With the system undergoing a major crisis, the public was more open to new and "radical" ideas. The major economic downturn made his support of welfarism seem rational and acceptable. When his policies did not result in the country turning socialist or communist, they came to be accepted as legitimate alternative tools for governance rather than as subversive ideologies.

In the case of Kim Dae Jung, the Cholla region, and the 386 generation, we see a telling interplay of regionalism and radical ideology that resulted in the minority gaining power. Kim Dae Jung clearly would not have been able to survive politically, let alone be elected president, without the support of the people of Cholla. Moreover, were it not for their support, his progressive policies would not have been trusted or tolerated. Cholla's people as a whole, however, were not more ideologically progressive than anywhere else. They supported Kim Dae Jung because he was from their region; regionalism trumped ideology. It was regional support that made the election of a progressive politician possible, and this in turn led to the implementation of progressive and liberal reforms. In this case, regionalism clearly made a contribution to democratization, expanding the country's ideological horizon.

Although Kim Dae Jung was a former dissident and champion of democracy, he also represented the older generation of the "Three Kims," along with Kim Young Sam and Kim Jong Pil, founder of the KCIA and later an opposition-party leader, who had allied himself at times with Kim Young Sam and at others with Kim Dae Jung. Kim Dae Jung was the greatest beneficiary of regionalism but was also hostage to it. Roh Moo Hyun and the 386 generation rejected regionalism, which they considered the Achilles heel of Korean politics. Roh's personnel policy, unlike that of the three Kims, was strictly according to an ideological code rather than regional loyalty. As a means of overcoming what it considered the backward politics of yesteryear, Roh's administration focused on maintaining ideological purity and consistency in its policies. Accordingly, it tried to build on the foundations of the welfare policy put in place by Kim Dae Jung and continued his policy of reconciliation toward North Korea as well. As a result, a recognizably progressive political platform and agenda were articulated and institutionalized in opposition to their traditional conservative counterparts.

Furthermore, as a progressive younger generation, the 386 group around Roh implemented policies aimed at undoing the worst aspects of the old authoritarian state. Thus it disavowed using the intelligence service, the tax-audit board, and the prosecutor's office—in the past the most effective instruments of power at the disposal of Korea's presidents. It also strictly adhered to and enforced campaign-finance and political-contribution laws, thereby severing the ties between business and politics that were at the root of corruption in South Korea. This reform agenda constituted one of the Roh administration's most important contributions of the to the consolidation of democracy in South Korea.

Elite Pact Making

In each of the five presidential elections since the transition to democracy, the transfer of power was effected through "elite political

pact-making," which was decried as political betrayal by those left out and as unprincipled behavior by everyone else. In the first posttransition election, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, longtime dissidents and partners in the fight for democracy, failed to agree on a single ticket and allowed their personal rivalry to prevent either from winning the presidency. As a result, Roh Tae Woo, an army general and key actor in the 1980 coup, captured the office. In the 1988 National Assembly election, Kim Young Sam's New Democratic Party became the smallest opposition party after Kim Dae Jung's Peaceful Democratic Party and Kim Jong Pil's Liberal Democratic Alliance.

In 1991, Kim Young Sam formed a pact with President Roh Tae Woo and Kim Jong Pil to form the Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) in a desperate attempt to revive his dying political fortunes. This alliance between political nemeses and ideological foes led to a major ideological reconfiguration in Korean politics—from authoritarians versus democrats to conservatives versus progressives—with Kim Young Sam affirming his conservative credentials by joining forces with Kim Jong Pil and Roh Tae Woo. The split between Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, cemented by the pact, also strengthened another major cleavage in Korean politics—regionalism. By joining hands with Roh Tae Woo, whose regional base was Taegu and North Kyongsang Province, Kim Young Sam, whose own power base was Pusan and South Kyongsang Province, was able to isolate Kim Dae Jung as the leader of the much smaller Cholla region. The only principle at work seemed to be political expediency, and many regarded this as a step backward for democracy. However, the gamble paid off when Kim Young Sam was elected president in 1992 as the candidate of the DLP.

Although his regime seemed tainted by compromise, Kim Young Sam was able to undertake radical democratic reforms precisely because he came to power as a representative of the conservative majority. Two of his most important legacies, the purging of the "Hanahoe" faction in the Korean military and the enactment of the "real-name bank account" legislation, were possible only because it was Kim Young Sam who undertook them. It was thanks to his conservative credentials and strong anticommunist stance that Kim Young Sam was able to disband the powerful army clique. He was likewise able to end the practice of holding bank accounts under pseudonyms, which had long enabled politicians and businessmen to maintain political slush funds and was a huge source of corruption. South Korea's democracy became stronger as a result of these reforms.

Kim Dae Jung, by himself joining forces with Kim Jong Pil in 1997, also allowed political expediency to override principle. That year, Kim Jong Pil provided Kim Dae Jung with the crucial margin of victory by delivering the votes from the Chungchong region, his power base, as well as some conservative support. The pact, signed in exchange for a

promise to usher in a parliamentary system and then to hand the reins over to Kim Jong Pil as prime minister midway through his presidential term, was a cynical political move motivated by nothing more than the thirst for power.

Once in office, however, having Kim Jong Pil as his political partner clearly helped Kim Dae Jung. The former Kim's unsullied reputation as an ultraconservative helped to allay the fears and suspicions of the conservatives toward Kim Dae Jung's progressive policy reforms. By the time Kim Jong Pil broke the pact and defected to the opposition two years later, Kim Dae Jung's administration and his reforms were well entrenched.

Even the progressive Roh Moo Hyun was willing to compromise his beliefs for a chance at high office. Roh agreed to join forces with Chung Mong Jun, son of Chung Ju Yung, the founder of Hyundai, the most widely recognized symbol of the military-backed developmental state that Roh had fought so hard to bring down. Chung defected on the eve of the elections, sparing Roh the ordeal of cohabitation with an utterly ill-matched political partner. Initially, however, Roh's pact with Chung helped to catapult his candidacy over the opposition candidate, Lee Hoi Chang, who until then was leading in the polls by a significant margin. Even though Roh's reputation as a principled politician was marred by the episode, it enabled him to win the presidency and carry out his reforms.

Despite its unseemliness, such unprincipled deal making did more than bring Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung, and Roh Moo Hyun to the Blue House (South Korea's presidential residence). It also eased the transition from a staunchly conservative political environment, beginning with Chun Doo Hwan's military-backed regime, to an increasingly liberal and progressive one, culminating in Roh Moo Hyun's ascension. That each transition featured unlikely alliances between political, regional, and ideological opponents helped to ease the turnovers.

Shocks to the System

Kim Dae Jung's standing as South Korea's most famous dissident and inveterate prodemocracy fighter was unmatched. Even after the transition to democracy, however, most doubted that the presidency would ever pass to the opposition—even with Kim Dae Jung at the helm. Two things made it highly unlikely that Kim Dae Jung would ever be elected president: First, he was from the minority Cholla region; and second, he held progressive views regarded by many as dangerously leftist. The creation of the massive DLP through the pact between Roh Tae Woo, Kim Young Sam, and Kim Jong Pil only confirmed people's suspicion that a conservative coalition very much like the LDP of Japan (after which the DLP was deliberately modeled, including the party name)

would stay in power indefinitely. When Kim Dae Jung announced that he was retiring from politics for good after the 1992 election and left for an extended sojourn in Great Britain, it seemed that South Korea's conservative future was sealed. Yet he was elected president in 1997. Two shocks—one external and one internal—helped him rise to office. The 1997 Asian financial crisis was the external shock, and Kim Dae Jung's pact with Kim Jong Pil was the internal one.

The blow dealt to Korea's economy by the financial crisis provided Kim Dae Jung an unexpected political opening. For decades, South Korea's successive authoritarian regimes had justified their repression of human rights and political rights by arguing that continued economic development required social cohesion and mobilization that only they could provide. They maintained that only a powerful security state could prevent or withstand another attack by communist North Korea. South Koreans endured the political repression so long as the authoritarian regimes delivered on their promise of continued rapid economic growth.

The 1997 crisis showed that the authoritarian system was not only politically reprehensible but also economically inept. When the only justification for its existence was proven false, people withdrew their support. Not everyone, of course, abandoned the system, which retained the backing of its anticommunist and Kyongsang loyalists. By the time of the election that year, though, support for the conservative status quo had fallen just enough in the Kyongsang region, and just enough voters decided to give maverick Kim Dae Jung a chance. With Kim Dae Jung's election in 1997, the people of South Korea showed that they could overcome ideological bias and regional bigotry and act as citizens of a mature democracy.

South Korea's democracy later withstood another huge shock with the National Assembly's impeachment of President Roh Moo Hyun in 2004. The ensuing political crisis tested the nation's resolve to abide by the constitution. In 2003, President Roh had created the Uri Party with 47 of his loyal supporters, the majority of whom, like the president, had broken away from the New Millennium Democratic Party (NMDP). The move was seen by many as a betrayal of the NMDP—it was, after all, the party that had nominated Roh as its candidate in the 2002 presidential election—and it led to a plunge in Roh's approval ratings. Furthermore, Roh suffered a series of foreign-policy setbacks. His policy of reconciliation with North Korea angered conservatives, and his efforts to negotiate the removal of U.S. bases from Seoul alarmed them; his decision to send troops to Iraq as part of the "coalition of the willing" alienated his progressive supporters; and his signing of the Free Trade Agreement with Chile drew the ire of farmers.

With Roh's approval ratings hitting rock bottom, the conservative opposition introduced a motion in the National Assembly to impeach him for allegedly violating election laws and for being "incompetent"

and "unqualified" to serve as president. Despite his party's efforts, the majority opposition passed the motion with a vote of 193-2, with Uri Party members abstaining. As the Constitutional Court deliberated on the constitutionality of the motion, public opinion began to turn in Roh's favor. Despite widespread disapproval of the president's policies, the people regarded the impeachment as improper and as a danger to the democratic process itself. Thus Roh's approval rating quickly soared from 30 to 50 percent. In the April 2004 National Assembly election, the Uri party scored a stunning victory, winning 156 seats out of 299. On May 14, the Constitutional Court ruled the impeachment motion unconstitutional.

The impeachment crisis was yet another example of how consolidated South Korean democracy had become. The people clearly understood that the democratic process itself was at stake, and they acted to preserve it, even though they did not always agree with the president on policy matters. Moreover, the decision of the Constitutional Court was never challenged. Democracy was not only preserved, it was strengthened.

A Shift in Political Discourse

The 2007 presidential election brought about recognizably liberal-democratic changes to the political discourse in South Korea. Grand narratives such as "nationalism," "ideology," "unification," and "democratization" ceased to dominate campaign discourse. Instead, nuts-and-bolts issues predominated. When asked in one survey to name "the most important task of the next president," 36.1 percent said "economic development and creation of jobs"; 27.4 percent said "closing the income gap and improving welfare"; 22.4 percent wanted "political and social unity"; 11.2 percent wanted "political reform and leadership"; and only 2.4 percent said "improving inter-Korean and diplomatic relations." This is an astonishing change from the 2002 election, when the sunshine policy and anti-Americanism overshadowed all other issues and ultimately decided the outcome.

Today, scholars and pundits in South Korea note the "demise of the '87 Regime." The '87 Regime refers to the terms of political debate articulated and imposed by the progressives in the wake of the democratic transition in 1987. Dichotomies such as "democracy versus dictatorship," "national reunification versus permanent national division," and "workers *(minjung)* versus capitalists *(chaebol)*" defined the terms of public debate under the '87 Regime.

Though they only partly informed the worldview of prodemocracy leaders such as Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, these dichotomies had far more influence on the 386 generation. The '87 Regime prioritized democracy over dictatorship, which many liberal opposition figures could readily agree to, but also regarded South Korea's politi-

cal economy as illegitimate because the military-led regime, backed by "American imperialism," was the single greatest obstacle to "national unification." Moreover, this discourse held that the crass capitalism spawned by the pro-American bourgeoisie, embodied by the huge family-owned and state-backed conglomerates called *chaebol,* rested on the brutal and continuous exploitation of the people and the workers.

As long as these terms framed the political debate, the progressives were able to lead and dominate the political agenda. The conservatives, who could never escape the labels of "American collaborators," "anti-democratic fascists," and "monopolistic capitalists," were perpetually on the defensive. More important, framing the debates this way radically and perpetually questioned the legitimacy of the South Korean state. Populism and leftist nationalism always had the upper hand, while liberal or conservative positions were inescapably branded "reformist" at best and "antinational" at worst. It was this poisonous antisystem discourse, rather than the lack of institutionalization of the various aspects of the political process, that kept South Korea's democracy fragile and less than consolidated.

What then led to the sudden demise of the '87 Regime during the 2007 presidential election cycle? The answer lies in the "contradictions" (a favorite '87 Regime term) between the system's radical propositions and the realities of South Korea's political economy. Even though the progressives came to power in the midst of a major economic collapse that seemed to prove leftist predictions correct, South Korea's economy recovered quickly and continued on its path of rapid growth. Moreover, during Kim Dae Jung's presidency, South Korea's per-capita income rose from $8,000 to $15,000; and under Roh Moo Hyun and the 386 generation, it peaked at $20,000. Thus their theories and predictions about the internal contradictions and failings of capitalism seemed less and less plausible to an ever-growing number of people.[11]

The failure of Roh Moo Hyun's economic policies dealt the final blow to the '87 Regime. His government was unable to control escalating real-estate prices fueled by speculation, and it failed to improve the educational system, both of which had a direct and negative impact on the average citizen. Roh and his cohorts had boasted of having solutions to these intractable problems, and when the promised results failed to materialize, the people's frustration intensified. At the same time, policy initiatives such as the Free Trade Agreement with the United States were seen by many, even among Roh's staunchest supporters, to be contrary to the spirit of a progressive administration seeking to redress the excesses of neoliberal policies and trends.

Thus by the time of the 2007 election, the grand narratives that had for so long dominated South Korean political discourse had largely disappeared. The only major campaign debates that year revolved around the economic and environmental feasibility of a major canal proposed by

opposition candidate Lee Myung Bak and allegations of shady business deals in Lee's past. As the ruling-party candidate, the progressives fielded Chung Dong Young, a well-known former television-news anchor, rather than any number of other major figures who had impressive resumes as dissidents and prodemocracy activists. One of the campaign slogans of the ruling New Democratic Party (NDP), successor to the dissolved Uri Party, was that it worked for the "middle class and the working class." Indeed, after losing the presidency, the NDP elected as its new leader Sohn Hak Kyu, an Oxford-educated, moderate liberal politician who was formerly a GNP leader, again bypassing politicians with more radical pedigrees. Clearly, the NDP has embraced a more tempered progressivism.

The "miraculous" quality of South Korea's democratic development arises from the fact that the very events which critics point to as symptoms of weakness were turned into opportunities to enact far-reaching reforms.

The conservatives, for their part, succeeded in making the economy the dominant campaign issue. They also succeeded in recasting the terms of political discourse, replacing the now-defunct '87 Regime with one that *they* could control. Now the dichotomies that frame the political debates in South Korea are "liberty versus equality," "growth versus welfare," "market versus state," and "globalization versus nationalism."

One of the clearest illustrations of the shift toward liberal democracy is the recent debate over U.S. beef imports that almost paralyzed President Lee Myung Bak's newly inaugurated government. During an April 2008 state visit to the United States, which included a summit with the U.S. president at Camp David, Lee announced that South Korea had decided to resume the importation of U.S. beef, originally suspended in 2003 due to safety concerns over mad-cow disease. The opposition seized on this issue, criticizing the government for caving in to U.S. pressure, and held a series of candlelight vigils in downtown Seoul that drew thousands of participants. Many observers have noted the striking similarities to the massive anti-American protests in 2002 sparked by the accidental killing of two middle-school girls by a U.S. Army personnel carrier. As such, the beef issue had the potential to deteriorate into another large-scale anti-American movement. In fact, there were clear indications that many progressive political organizations were actively mobilizing their supporters to participate in the demonstrations.

In contrast to 2002, however, both the opposition and the participants in these vigils went to great lengths to counter any allegations that their rallies were motivated by anti-Americanism or radical nationalism. Rather, they professed to be concerned about public health as well as some of the tactics that the government used in negotiating with

the United States. Whereas in 2002 many politicians (most famously Roh Moo Hyun during his run for president) had proudly brandished anti-American sentiments, in 2008 no one made moves overtly to take advantage of radical nationalism. In six short years, radical nationalism went from being the most visible and potent political sentiment in South Korea to one that had to be disguised as concern over concrete policy issues. To be sure, it is far too early to predict the demise of radical nationalist discourse, but this shift is nonetheless profoundly significant.

South Korea's democratic trajectory has often been messy, but it has led to consolidation. It allowed opposition leaders to wrest political power from entrenched players and institutions, thus making former dissidents and antisystem radicals responsible stakeholders in a system that had long oppressed them. Because each succeeding government after the 1987 transition was more progressive than the one before, South Korea's ideological range broadened from one that was staunchly anti-leftist to one that accepted even the most radical elements. Furthermore, since each new phase in South Korea's democratic development was made possible through pact-making between unlikely political partners, the political system was spared any radical destabilization from the transfer of power to the opposition. Finally, internal and external shocks facilitated alternations of power and major reforms that otherwise would not have been possible.

The "miraculous" quality of South Korea's democratic development arises from the fact that the very events and features which critics point to as signs and symptoms of weakness were time and again turned into opportunities to enact far-reaching reforms. As a result, a polity that was suffering from poverty, political unrest, and dictatorship as recently as twenty years ago has now joined the ranks of industrialized liberal democracies. To be sure, there are still areas in which democratization and liberalization need to make more progress, but the foundations of a liberal-democratic order have been consolidated. The rest, as they say, is a matter of details.

NOTES

1. Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim, eds., *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2000), 4.

2. Diamond and Kim, *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea,* 5.

3. To the adherents of "*dependencia* theory," which was poplar among progressive intellectuals and students in Korea during this time, the South Korean economy was a classic case of "dependent development." There were also more mainstream critics who doubted that South Korea's economic development was genuine: see, for example, Paul Krugman, "The Myth of the Asian Miracle," *Foreign Affairs* 73 (November–December 1994).

4. Doh C. Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 250.

5. Diamond and Kim, *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea*, 2.

6. Hyug Baeg Im, "Faltering Democratic Consolidation in South Korea: Democracy at the End of the 'Three Kims' Era," *Democratization* 11 (December 2004): 179–98, 195.

7. Nicholas Eberstadt, "A Republic—If South Koreans Can Keep It," *On the Issues,* Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1 April 2004. Available at *www.aei.org/docLib/20040326_16548Eberstadtgraphics.pdf*.

8. Choi Jang Jip, *Democracy after Democratization: The Korean Experience,* trans. Lee Kyung-hee (Seoul: Humanitas, 2005), 27.

9. Sangmook Lee, "Democratic Transition and the Consolidation of Democracy in South Korea," *Taiwan Journal of Democracy* 3 (July 2007): 99–125.

10. Another important measure of the degree of consolidation of Korean democracy is the longevity of the GNP, which just regained power. The party, founded in 1997, has been around for eleven years—a very long time for a party in South Korea. In a political system notorious for politicians creating and disbanding political parties at will, that the GNP has survived a decade in opposition intact is a clear sign that parties are at last becoming institutionalized.

11. Ironically, the 1997 financial crisis also decimated the pool of recruits for radical university-student groups and movements, as potential recruits, who were suddenly faced without the guarantee of a job as before, started devoting themselves to their studies to get better grades.