

Getting the Military out of Politics in South Korea

Nam Kyu Kim

(Korea University)

For more than a quarter of the century from 1960 to 1987, South Korea was under the rule of two military dictatorships. When faced with massive pro-democracy movements in 1987, however, the militaries returned peacefully to their barracks and remained in the military domain. Since then, South Korea has become a consolidated democracy that faces little risk of authoritarian reversal. South Korea's experience of democratic transition provides useful lessons for other transitional democracies. In particular, South Korea's successful transition from the military rule provides great insight for overcoming what Huntington called "the praetorian problem"¹— one of the most critical problems plaguing many fledgling democracies. This essay briefly discusses why the South Korean military decided to retreat from politics and what factors prevented the military from intervening in politics following democratization.

Importance of Establishing Civilian Control

Democratic accountability requires that elected officials exercise effective governing power without challenges from non-elected authorities. However, newly-established democratic regimes often remain susceptible to military intervention.² The military, as a permanent part of the state apparatus, protects the state from internal and external adversaries and thus has privileged access to coercive resources. The military's special position within the state enables it to contest policies promoted by elected officials and even overthrow democratically-elected governments. Therefore, curtailing the military's political power and privileges as well as establishing civilian control are critical to successful democratic consolidation.

However, these measures are particularly difficult for young democracies transitioning from military rule.

¹ Samuel P. Huntington. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993), p.209.

² See Samuel E. Finer. *The Man on Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics*. (London: PallMall, 1962); Samuel P. Huntington. *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil–Military Relations*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Zoltan Barany. *The Soldier and the Changing State: Building Democratic Armies in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); David Pion-Berlin. *Soldiers, Politicians, and Civilians: Reforming Civil-Military Relations in Democratic Latin America*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

Establishing civilian control in these democracies requires two steps. Firstly, the military must withdraw from politics. Secondly, the democracy must institute civilian control that eliminates the military's reserved domains, establishes the civilian government's ability to monitor and control military officers, and familiarizes officers with military professionalism and democratic norms. Without the second step, young democracies remain vulnerable to military interventions and coups, as illustrated in countries such as Honduras, Pakistan, and Thailand. Militaries may again intervene in politics when they feel their interests are threatened or believe that their entry into politics is necessary to stabilize the country. Many political science studies demonstrate that democracies established after military dictatorships are much less likely to survive than those transitioning from civilian dictatorships. A recent empirical study shows that a democracy preceded by a military dictatorship is about 50 percent more likely to break down than a democracy preceded by a civilian dictatorship or a monarchy.³

Why Concession to Democratic Reforms?

South Korea's democratic transition was driven by pressure from below through the mobilization of the masses rather than by the ruling elites. Although the elite bargaining between military rulers, including President Chun Doo-hwan and his chosen successor, Roh Tae-woo, and opposition leaders, including Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, ushered in direct presidential elections, mass movements for democracy were the ultimate reason for compelling ruling elites into negotiations.⁴ These culminated in constitutional reforms that introduced the 1987 presidential and 1998 legislative elections. Bottom-up demands for democracy continued throughout the term of President Chun who suffered from a persistent legitimacy crisis due to both the manner of his entry into power and the Kwangju Massacre⁵ in the spring of 1980. In 1987, which was the final year of President Chun's seven-year presidential term, mass protests in South Korea demanding for direct presidential elections and democratic reform were at their height, posing a significant threat to Chun's military regime. Faced with such pro-democracy protests, the military regime decided to accept democratic reform rather than to repress the protests. Several factors led the military regime to arrive at this decision.

First of all, one of the most important reasons why the ruling elites decided to withhold harsh suppression measures and instead yield to democratization was due to the characteristics of the pro-democracy movement. The movement for democracy was a broad-based and cross-class coalition involving middle class people, workers, students, and church leaders, and had mainly adopted nonviolent tactics after 1987. Nonviolent protests tend to reduce the cost of participation, easing the collective action problem, and have a broad appeal across various societal groups. Therefore, these protests, which are perceived as less threatening, are able to mobilize a larger number of

³ Milan W. Svoblik. "Which democracies will last? Coups, incumbent takeovers, and the dynamic of democratic consolidation." *British Journal of Political Science* 45, no. 4 (October 2015), p. 727.

⁴ For instance, see Sunhyuk Kim. *The politics of democratization in Korea: The role of civil society*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Uk Heo and Terence Roehrig. *South Korea since 1980*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Haggard, Stephan and Robert R. Kaufman. *Dictators and democrats: Masses, elites, and regime change*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).

⁵ It refers to the Chun regime's bloody repression of democracy protests in the city of Kwangju in South Jeolla province on May 18, 1980.

citizens and are more likely to facilitate negotiation with authoritarian elites compared to violent protests. Along with the previous experience of the Kwangju tragedy and pressure from the United States, the cross-class and nonviolent nature of the democracy movement made it difficult for the regime to respond with violent repression. Even inside the regime where hard-liners and soft-liners tended to disagree, hard-liners found repressive options too costly to adopt.

Another important reason for the military regime's decision to agree to democratization was the military ruling elites' expectation that their positions and interests would not be threatened by the democratic rule that would follow. Their certainty was based on three structural factors. Firstly, economic conditions were favorable to ruling elites when democratic transition was underway. Economic growth rates were 12.6% in 1986 and 12.3% in 1987 respectively.⁶ The two military regimes, including that of the predecessor Park Chung-hee, had successful economic records.⁷ The successful economic records of past military regimes helped to convince the Chun regime that their military would be able to retain public support even in the case of democratization, and hence contributed to the smooth transition to democracy.

Secondly, military dictatorships' ruling strategies also led to reduced concerns about democracy. Unlike military dictatorships in Latin America, the military did not directly rule as an institution. Under the 'quasi-civilianized' rule, the military exercised indirect influence, and only members of the dominant Hanahoe faction⁸ were the ones to truly reap the benefits of military rule. Moreover, unlike other military regimes in Pakistan and Indonesia, the military was prohibited from operating enterprises and owning business assets. This lack of perks meant that the majority of military officers who remained in the barracks were not incentivized to strongly defend the military rule in the face of massive protests.

At the same time, the ruling and legitimation strategies of the Chun government played an important role. President Chun Doo-hwan allowed multiparty elections for the legislature, though elections were neither free nor fair. President Chun removed all appointed legislative seats under the previous Yushin system established by his predecessor President Park Chung Hee. Like his predecessor Park, President Chun established a political party called "Democratic Justice Party (DJP)", upon which he relied to mobilize mass support and hold legislative elections. Because of these strategies, the military regime was left with a strong political party that possessed organizational resources and networks. The ruling party's institutional strength and its confidence helped to prepare for democratic elections. Given that a split in the opposition bloc was also likely to occur because of the coordination failure between the two Kims from the democratic force, military elites anticipated that they might be able to stay in power even after democratization.

Lastly, the security environment in the Korean Peninsula provided an important structural context for the military's decision to retreat from politics without worrying about the loss of their power. Due to South Korea's

⁶ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.KD.ZG?locations=KR>

⁷ The average annual GDP growth rates of the Park regime was 9.45%, while that of the Chun regime was 8.47%. See the previous link to the World Bank.

⁸ The Hanahoe faction refers to a small group of Korean Military Academy graduates who were from the North Kyongsang province. Both Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo were key founding members of the faction.

hostile relations with North Korea, armed forces did not need to worry about their organizational resources and autonomy being significantly undermined. As a result, the regime was assured that South Korea's substantial and ongoing security need would prevent the next regime from cutting the national military expenditure.

Why Did the Military not Intervene again?

Taken together, bottom-up pressure from the pro-democracy movement and the ruling elites' strategic calculation brought about democratic transition via negotiation. This transition mode allows military elites to negotiate their withdrawal with the relatively high level of leverage. In the first democratic presidential election held in 1987, Roh Tae-woo was elected, as the two Kims participated in the election and split the opposition votes. President Roh placed officers with close ties to him in key positions in both the government and the military, and did not undertake any major military reform, although he weakened the pro-Chun group in the Hanahoe faction. Military elites remained politically powerful and satisfied during the early years of democratization. Unlike many transitional democracies that often experience economic crises and political instability, the Roh regime inherited a strong economy and was spared any insurmountable political crisis. These economic and political conditions enabled a smooth transition to democracy without triggering military interventions.

Combined with citizens' strong support for democracy, this smooth transition paved the way for the establishment of civilian control. Citizens were satisfied with democracy and strongly supported these reforms, while public criticism over military elites' continued influence increased. This allowed the next President, Kim Young-sam, to undertake the massive purges on the Hanahoe faction. As the first democratically-elected civilian President following the Yushin system, President Kim enjoyed the high level of popular support, which further protected the democratic regime against any potential opposition that might arise from the military. President Kim also exploited divisions within the military. Non-Hanahoe officers supported the purges and the prosecution of politically-influential officers, which hindered Hanahoe faction officers from resisting the military reform.

In conclusion, South Korea sets an example for countries undergoing democratic transition, particularly in terms of successfully overcoming legacies of the military rule. The South Korean case clearly demonstrates the importance of a strong civil society in driving democratic transition and consolidation. Strong social movements initiated democratic transition and promoted democratic consolidation. At the same time, the South Korean case highlights the importance of both the legacy from the previous authoritarian regimes and the negotiated transition to democracy. These factors allow South Korea to successfully achieve democratic transition and consolidation without any major setback. In the end, searching the ways to incentivize the military to accept the popular demand for democratization is critical for successful transition from the military rule to democracy.

- Nam Kyu Kim is an Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Korea University. His research interests include the politics of authoritarian regimes, civil-military relations, democratization, and the interaction between domestic politics and international relations. His work has appeared in *Comparative Political Studies*, *Democratization*, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Peace Research*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and others. He received his Ph.D. in political science from the University of Michigan, and previously taught at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and Sungkyunkwan University, before moving to his current post in 2020.

The East Asia Institute takes no institutional position on policy issues and has no affiliation with the Korean government. All statements of fact and expressions of opinion contained in its publications are the sole responsibility of the author or authors.

“Getting the Military out of Politics in South Korea”

979-11-6617-012-6 95340

Date of Issue: 27 August 2020

Typeset by Eunji Lee

For inquiries:

Eunji Lee, Research Associate/Project Manager

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 207)

ejlee@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr