

Korea's Democratization and Its Implications for Cooperation in the Pacific Region

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Abstract

Recent political development in Pacific nations shows that democratization is a very complex process, which - at least in the short term - may not always produce a positive impact on regional cooperation. Each democratizing or newly democratized country is facing particular problems arising from various factors. Democratization could increase the level of political instability by creating new political cleavages and increasing political polarization. It could also result in changes in foreign policies, sometimes in a direction that poses obstacles to effective cooperation among Pacific countries

The case of South Korea illustrates well the problems and challenges of democratic development and its implications for cooperation in the Pacific community. While there is little doubt that democracy in Korea has become "the only game in town," Korean politics has become deeply polarized since President Rho took office in 2003. Political polarization is related to the expansion of the ideological spectrum to the extent that is unforeseen in the history of Korea since the end of the Korean War. During the Rho administration, the alliance with the U.S. has been somewhat weakened, and some Korean people even have the view that Korea should strengthen its cooperation with China while trying to reduce the U.S. influence on Korea. This kind of view has a negative impact on the cooperation among Pacific democracies.

The Korean case suggests that for more effective cooperation, Pacific democracies need to have a deeper understanding of the rapidly changing political realities of other aspiring or new democracies in the region. And new and more diversified networks of communication and cooperation need to be constructed reflecting wider political spectrum of the countries.

Keywords: Korea, democratization, political polarization, cooperation, Pacific democracies

I. Introduction

The expansion of the democratic governments in the Pacific region in the last couple of decades suggests that the long-term prospect for the regional cooperation is bright. And the continuing expansion and deepening of democracies is likely to have a positive impact on the cooperation among Pacific countries.¹ However, these general tendency and expectation may not be realized successfully without conscious efforts of the countries in the region to expand the democratic Pacific community and to establish the effective networks of cooperation. In fact, recent political development in Pacific nations shows clearly that democratization is a very complex process, which - at least in the short term - may not always produce a positive impact on regional cooperation. Each democratizing or newly democratized country is facing particular problems arising from specific historical backgrounds and cultural factors as well as socioeconomic and political structures and situations. Democratization could increase the level of political instability by creating new political cleavages and polarization, which if not dealt with properly, may lead not to a mature liberal democracy but to a low quality democracy at best. And in some countries, transition from authoritarian rule often has not resulted in the establishment and consolidation of democracy. Instead a variety of the hybrid regimes have emerged with a diverse mixture of democratic and authoritarian elements.² Democratization could also result in changes in foreign policies,

¹ Chang-hun Oh, "Political Development and the Prospects for Cooperation in the Pacific Region." Paper submitted to the Preliminary Meeting of the Democratic Pacific Assembly. The Westin Resort. Ta Shee, Taiwan. (December 14-15, 2002).

² Recently there has been criticism of the "paradigm" of democratic transition and consolidation. According to the criticism, theories of democratization, which are based upon

sometimes in a direction that poses obstacles to effective regional cooperation. Thus to strengthen cooperation in the region, it is important to understand the complexities of the political development in Pacific nations.

II. Democratic Development in Korea and Increasing Political Confrontation and Polarization

The case of South Korea illustrates well some of the problems and challenges of democratic development and its implications for cooperation in the Pacific community.³ From one perspective, Korean democracy has been consolidated in the sense that the reversal to the authoritarian or semi-authoritarian rule is not conceivable. Since democratic transition in Korea began in 1987, 4 democratic governments including the current Rho government have existed. All of them satisfy the essential criteria of political democracy: free and fair elections under universal suffrage, the guarantee of political rights and civil liberties, and the absence of the “reserved domains” of power.⁴ All three previous regimes finished full 5-year terms, and there was a

a teleological and optimistic view of political development, are not very useful in analyzing politics in many countries. For more discussion from this perspective, see for example, Guillermo O'Donnell, “Illusions about Consolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 7, No. 2 (April), pp. 34-51; Thomas Carothers, “The End of the Transition Paradigm,” *Journal of Democracy* 13, No. 1 (January), pp. 5-21. Although theories of democratic transition and consolidation do not necessarily view that there will be a successful full democratization for most countries in transition from authoritarianism, I agree that the excessive focus on the issues of transition and consolidation tend to result in an insufficient attention to the complex political realities of the countries under study.

³ The following discussion will not include all the issues and problems of democratic development in Korea. Only those issues that have important implications for the regional cooperation will be discussed.

⁴ For the “Reserved Domains” of Power, see for example J. Samuel Valenzuela, “Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notions, Process, and Facilitating Conditions,”

peaceful turnover of the government to the opposition in 1998 for the first time in Korean history. Judging from the fact that there has existed no significant attitudinal and behavioral threats to the democratic regime since the establishment of the democratic government in 1988, there is little doubt that democracy in Korea will be sustainable in the future. Although one could argue that Korean democracy has not been consolidated because there have been repeated attempts of the conservative groups to delegitimize the Rho regime for the reasons that will be discussed below, it should be pointed out that they are not anti-democrats advocating to the return to authoritarianism, and that very few of them would have a real intention (let alone the capacity) to overthrow the Rho regime. The fact that Korean democracy has withstood such difficult times as the “IMF economic crisis” and the President's impeachment testifies its sustainability, and this is a significant political accomplishment.

However, it does not mean that democracy in Korea has now become mature. In fact, political situations have deteriorated in some important aspects particularly since President Rho took office in 2003. Politics has become deeply polarized as the nation has been sharply divided over the major foreign policy and domestic issues, which include the U.S.-Korean relationship, American forces in Korea, dispatch of Korean troops to Iraq, policy toward North Korea, North Korea's nuclear development, economic policies, educational reforms, press reforms, fact-finding activities on historical matters (such as pro-Japanese activities under Japanese colonialism, “suspicious death” under the previous authoritarian regimes, and pro-democracy activities), amendment or abolishment of the National Security Law, and the relocation of the national capital.

in Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), pp. 64-66.

The political confrontation was developed into a serious political crisis when the opposition-dominated National Assembly voted to impeach President Rho in March this year on the charges of illegal election campaigning, incompetence and economic mismanagement. Overwhelming majority of people was opposed to the unprecedented impeachment of the President, although many of them were critical about his job performance.⁵ As a result, the support for those opposition parties, which voted for the impeachment, significantly declined while the pro-government Uri Party gained its support. In the ensuing National Assembly elections held in April, the Uri Party, which only had had 46 seats (of a total of 271), won the majority of the seats (152 of a total of 299), reflecting public discontent for opposition politicians. The elections also resulted in the significant increase in the number of first-term legislators. Compared to the incumbents, these Assemblymen tend to be younger and more progressive. Rho returned to power after the Constitutional Court reinstated him, but Korean political atmosphere has remained highly charged. Almost every important policy issue is highly politicized, and one can hardly find political tolerance and moderation in current Korean politics. As the results of the recent polls conducted in late June show, the public does not support either side in the current situation. The public support for the President remains low, and the Uri Party and the Grand National Party are almost equal in their popularities. The approval rating for the President was only 25.4 percent. The support for the parties was 27.7 percent for the Grand National Party, 27.6 percent for Uri Party, 18.8 percent for the progressive Democratic Labor Party and 3.5 percent for the

⁵ A foreign analyst commented on the impeachment, “what the National Assembly provided was a perfect example of ‘rule by law’, the opportunistic, unprincipled and entirely situational use of legal statutes by the powerful to gain political advantage.” Nicholas Eberstadt, “Democracy’s Demons: An Impeachment Exposes the Sordid Opportunism of South Korean Politics,” *Time Asia Magazine*, March 29, 2004.

Millennium Democratic Party.⁶

Considering the high level of political confrontation and polarization, we can say that the quality of democracy is not very high although democracy in Korea is consolidated. Some of the Pacific nations are facing similar problems: What is consolidating in some countries is not a mature liberal democracy but a low-quality liberal democracy or an electoral democracy. Other countries even cannot be considered a democracy because they lack one or more necessary elements of democracy. However, there are reasons that one should not be too pessimistic about the prospect of democratic development in Korea. Current political confrontation and polarization, although it is not desirable, may not lead to a long-term political stagnation or regression. It can be viewed as a challenge to overcome for the democratic development in Korea.

It is the reform measures of the Rho government that resulted in an important way to the high level of political tension and polarization, although the situations have been aggravated by other policy issues, the leadership style of the President, and the way in which the reforms have been pursued. The significant socioeconomic and political reforms, the government believes, are needed to change long-standing structural problems, which have not been successfully dealt with in the earlier democratization period. The government also seems to view that for the reforms to succeed, more reform-minded leaders should replace the conservatives both within the state, political society, and civil society. The reform measures, however, have been met with a strong resistance from conservative opposition forces (including conservative newspapers) for the reason that the reforms have been used for partisan purposes. The opposition argue that the government is preoccupied with reforms ignoring the urgent task of economic recovery; that the ruling group

⁶ *Dong-A Daily* (Donga.com., July 1, 2004).

themselves are contaminated with corruption; that the Rho Administration is highly incompetent; and that ideological perspective of the current political leaders is too radical to pursue the appropriate reforms and to preserve a healthy democracy and free market capitalism. According to the conservatives, it is the Rho regime that is primarily responsible for creating all the political turmoil.

There are elements of truth in the opposition's criticism of the Rho regime. Many people point out that uncompromising and outspoken character of the President Rho has more often than not exacerbated the situations. And reform measures such as the tough measures on the real estate speculation seem to work against market recovery without producing concrete results yet at the time the economy is still in a long and serious recession. Thus the reform programs should also be carried out more judiciously. However, for the development of a mature democracy in Korea, significant socioeconomic and political reforms should be carried out. Particularly serious is the deep-seated corruption that has continued to pervade Korean politics. It should be recognized that the continuing low popular support for the Grand National Party is at least partly due to the party's previous association with political corruption on a grand scale. In the short term, the reform measures in Korea inevitably create political confrontation and instability. But if impartially and successfully carried out, they will contribute to the democratic stability and development in the long run.

Democratization has resulted in the expansion of the ideological spectrum to the extent that is unforeseen in the history of Korea since the establishment and consolidation of the rigid anti-communist system in the aftermath of the Korean War. The Rho government came to power with the support of progressive civic groups and younger population. Supporters of Rho are dissatisfied with rigid anti-communist ideologies of the conservative forces as well as corrupt practices prevalent in Korea. They have participated actively in

politics to support and push for reforms. In doing so, they have utilized the internet very well which emerged as very powerful political means to disseminate information, to mobilize supports, and to put the political pressure. Democratic civic groups, while sometimes divided on specific issues, have become stronger vis-à-vis the state and the political society. The progressive Democratic Labor Party, which had been established in 2000, has contributed to the expansion of the political spectrum in Korea by coming strong in the National Assembly elections as it won 10 seats.

III. The Impact on Foreign Policies and Implications for Cooperation in the Pacific Region

Democratization has also affected foreign policies significantly as was seen in Kim Dae Jung's "Sunshine Policy" toward North Korea. During the Rho Administration, the security alliance with the U.S. has been somewhat constrained, and this is related to the fact that progressive civic groups, young people, and even some political leaders and high ranking government officials have anti-American sentiments and want to establish a more self-reliant defense posture. The results of a recent nationwide poll confirm that anti-American sentiments are widespread, if not deep-rooted, among Korean people. When 800 Korean adults were asked about "the country that threatens the security of our country most," 39 percent of the respondents pointed the U.S., while 33.0 percent picked North Korea. 11.6 percent chose China and 7.6 percent named Japan.⁷ The rather surprising changes for the last 10 years or so in the perspectives on the U.S.-Korean relationship result from complex interplay of

⁷ Poll conducted by the Research and Research. January 5, 2004.

the various factors such as generational change, socioeconomic and political development, a series of historical events, and bad policies and judgments (on both sides of the U.S. and Korea). While the security alliance with the U.S. should be adjusted for the development of a more equal partnership, the emotionally charged anti-Americanism does not serve the national interest of Korea. A problem is that some even have the view that Korea should strengthen its cooperation with China while trying to reduce the U.S. influence on Korea.⁸ This kind of view is naive and will have a negative impact on the cooperation between Taiwan and Korea as well as among Pacific democracies.

Fortunately, there is an increasing domestic criticism that the Korean government is taking unjustifiably compliant attitudes toward China. And recent events have affected negatively the feelings of Korean people toward China. In May this year, the Chinese embassy in Seoul called several Korean National Assemblymen who were going to attend the inauguration ceremony of the President Chen Shui-bian, and asked them not to go to Taipei. According to the news reports, the Chinese caller(s) implied that if the legislators attend the inauguration ceremony, they would not be allowed to enter China in the future. Many people considered it as a meddling with the internal affairs of Korea and were surprised and angered by the arrogance of the Chinese government shown in this incident. More recently, China's state-run media such as Xinhua News Agency and the People's Daily suddenly claimed that Goguryeo (37 B.C. - 668 A.D.), an ancient kingdom of Korea, had been a regional government of China, and thus Goguryeo is a part of Chinese history. Since Goguryeo has been

⁸ A recent study of the first-term Assemblymen show their strong interest in the relationship with China. In a survey taken after the Assembly elections this year, the first-term legislators were asked about which country should be considered the most important one in Korean foreign policy, 55.0 percent chose China while 44.8 percent picked the U.S. *Dong-A Daily* (Donga.com. April 18, 2004)

clearly and for so long recognized by the Korean people as a part of Korean territory in the ancient periods, most Korean people were amazed by the new assertions made by the Chinese media and wants to know the motive behind them. It remains to be seen how and/or whether this situation will change the perception of the Korean people toward China and influence the relationship between China and Korea.

The Korean case suggests that for more effective cooperation, Pacific democracies need to have a deeper understanding of the rapidly changing political realities of other aspiring or new democracies in the region. To get an accurate perspective on other countries in democratic transition, consolidation, or deepening, diverse sources of information must be collected and systematically analyzed on time. In the case of Korea, in addition to the perspectives of the conservative groups, the views of the Internet media, democratic civic groups, and the newly emerged political elites and government officials should be considered. It appears that the views of the progressive civic groups are not very well understood. This is partly because well-established print media are mostly conservative and provide only a limited and according to the progressives, rather biased information on them. Although they tend to present more “radical” views on some important issues, many of those in progressive civic organizations are more committed to the fundamental human values such as human rights, democracy, and peace than traditional conservatives. In order to expand cooperation in the Pacific region on a firmer basis, thus, new and more diversified networks of communication and cooperation need to be constructed reflecting wider political spectrum of democratizing or newly democratized countries. The networks, by allowing the constructive exchanges of the views on the important issues of mutual concerns including democratic development, could contribute to the development and

expansion of the mutual understanding that nations in this region should unite with shared commitment to democratic values.

IV. Implications for Cooperation between Taiwan and Korea

If we look at the implications of Korean democratization for the relationship between Taiwan and Korea, there are many rooms for improvement. Although the political relationship between the two central governments at the formal level has been constrained due to the external power, the Rho government could and should exert more efforts in promoting cultural and social exchanges and cooperation with Taiwan. Also, since democratization has resulted in a greater autonomy of the local governments and assemblies in Korea, mutual cooperation could be enhanced between local governments of the two countries. More importantly, significant expansion of exchanges and cooperation at the level of civil society is possible because China has only a limited influence at that level. If we look at the education area, for example, there exist a lot of opportunities for more cooperative relationship. For the last several years, international educational exchanges of Korea have been significantly increased as a result of the efforts of the government and academic institutions to increase the internationalization of the education and to enroll more students from foreign countries. More foreign students are coming to Korea for study, and cooperative programs with foreign educational institutions have been substantially expanded. And in some universities, the facilities, services and benefits for foreign students have been greatly improved. Since most higher educational institutions are trying to continue to expand the friendly relationship with foreign institutions, there are good chances for more

cooperation between educational institutions of the two countries.⁹ With an increasing power of civil society vis-à-vis the state and political society in a democratized Korea, expanding cooperation at the level of civil society could affect the relationship at the level of the state.

The Chinese government has been always trying hard to prevent Taiwan and Korea from strengthening the mutually cooperative relationships. In fact, China has shown stronger attitudes toward Korea than she does to other countries such as the U.S. and Japan. Concerted efforts should be made to persuade China not to react so sensitively: It should be understood that the threatening behaviors would not work well in the era of democratization, and would only let other countries believe more that China is not a respectful member of the Pacific community. If China wants to expand international influence, she should make efforts to increase the prestige by liberalizing and democratizing the domestic political situations of the country and by becoming a more peaceful international actor. In the meantime, democratized Taiwan deserves much more influence in the Pacific community, and has the rights to play an important role in promoting cooperation among Pacific countries by developing a coalition of political forces sharing democratic values and dedicated to the democratic development.

⁹ Useful information on Korean educational institutions can be found at the website of the Korean National Institute for International Education Development. As a political scientist, I would also like to see more exchanges of views on democratic development and reforms between Taiwanese and Korean scholars.

從南韓政治民主化看亞太民主國家之合作

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摘要

近來對亞洲太平洋地區國家的民主化發展是個非常複雜的過程，雖然各國具有同樣追求民主化的目標，但是因為各自面臨的問題不盡相同，因此民主化不見得能促進各國之間的合作。特別是因民主化導致各國內部的歧異和對立加劇，進而影響到外交政策，這對亞太國家的合作可能造成障礙。

南韓的民主化便提供了一個標準的例子。南韓的民主化雖然確立了民主的內涵與程序，也深化了民主鞏固，但是自從盧武鉉總統於2003年上任以來，南韓的政治對立日益嚴重，其中對南韓自從韓戰以來的發展也出現不同的解讀，許多人認為韓國不應該跟美國過度結盟，反而應該多多發展與中國的關係以減低南韓對美國的依賴。這類的論調或是政策走向將對亞太民主國家的合作形成負面的效應。

因此，為了加深亞太地區民主國家的合作，各國應該加深對其他國家快速轉變的認識與瞭解，不但必須瞭解各國的民主化過程與議題，更應該針對各國不同的情況發展出更為有效的溝通形式與管道。

關鍵字：南韓、民主化、政治對立、合作、亞太民主國家