Three waves of East Asian democratization

Three great waves of democratization have washed across the modern world, and each has brought change to East Asia. In Samuel P. Huntington’s oft-cited words, a political system is democratic “to the extent that its most powerful collective decision-makers are selected through fair, honest, and periodic elections in which candidates freely compete for votes and in which virtually all the adult population is eligible to vote” (1991, 7). The “first wave” (1828–1926) brought nascent democracy to Japan, while the “second” (1943–1962) and “third” (1974–2001) waves carried it to South Korea and Taiwan, respectively. Interestingly, the three waves left behind a parliamentary system in Japan, a presidential republic in South Korea, and a semi-presidential republic in Taiwan. While these dissimilar institutional arrangements currently exist within thriving democracies, it is important to recall that “reverse waves” washed away the first two attempts at East Asian democratization. Indeed, the “first reverse wave” (1922–1942) obliterated Japan’s initial experiment with democracy, while the “second reverse wave” (1958–1975) led to the failure of South Korea’s initial attempt (ibid, 14). It remains to be seen whether or not Taiwanese democracy will succumb to an as yet unseen “third reverse wave” or if a possible “fourth wave” will bring democracy to China or, perhaps, even North Korea.

This chapter surveys the evolving political institutions and processes of democratization of East Asia, focusing intensively on the cases of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. Although Mongolia democratized almost simultaneously with Taiwan, for the purposes of this survey, the Taiwanese case will be used to exemplify that of a “third-wave” democratizer. In recounting these dissimilarly similar narratives, the focus is trained on the watershed moments that opened the door to democratizing reform, the actions of the principal proponents and opponents of change, and the manner in which democratic institutions evolved and grew roots. In other words, the analysis in this chapter focuses on a pair of processes – the transition to democracy and its consolidation. The critical point in the transition process is the replacement of a government that was not chosen democratically with one that is “selected in a free, open, and fair election” (ibid, 9). As for consolidation, it assumes concrete form with “the turnover of government control from one party to another as the result of elections.”
The litmus test for further consolidation is the “two-turnover test,” which occurs when the party that took control in the first turnover turns control over to another party (ibid, 237, 266–267). An understanding of the processes of democratic transition and consolidation in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan offers critical insights into the prospects for political stability in East Asia, an important, dynamic, and often misunderstood region of the world.

In the sections that follow, the story of East Asian democratization is recounted in the historical sequence in which it unfolded, beginning with the case of Japan and followed by that of South Korea and then Taiwan. The central findings and their broad implications are summarized in a brief conclusion. In addition, consideration is given to the possibility of a “fourth wave” that might bring democracy to China and North Korea, which remain under the tight control of nondemocratic regimes.

The first wave – Japan

Establishing a democratic order in Japan was an unintended consequence of the modernizing reforms that came to be known as the “Meiji Restoration” of 1868. In fact, the oligarchy of ex-samurai who led the charge that toppled the Tokugawa Shōgun was at pains to erect an institutional infrastructure that kept the forces of popular democracy in check. Yet strains within the Meiji Government that began to appear in the early 1870s led to the emergence of anti-government protest groups that morphed into the country’s first “people’s parties” (mintō). Those parties played a leading role in a “freedom and popular rights movement” that eventually forced the oligarchs to grant a constitution that created a bicameral parliament known as the “Diet” after the Prussian institution in whose likeness its was modeled. Members of the Diet’s House of Representatives were elected by a razor-thin franchise composed of tax-paying male voters, and additional obstacles to a democratic breakout included an equipotent unelected House of Peers; unaccountable military branches; and a Privy Council, senior statesmen, and imperial court officials who advised a sovereign emperor. Nevertheless, with their penchant for squabbling over the government’s budget proposals and, on occasion, passing symbolic but annoying nonconfidence motions, the people’s parties became a perpetual thorn in the heel of the Meiji oligarchs.

When, in 1898, the two largest people’s parties merged to form the Constitutional Government Party – which controlled an overwhelming number of seats in the Diet’s lower house – the oligarchs gave in and allowed its leader to establish the country’s first “party cabinet.” Over the course of the next thirty-four years, party cabinets would alternate with “transcendental cabinets” – whose ministers included few, if any, elected politicians – until, at last, the appointment of the leader of the largest party to prime minister became the “normal course of constitutional governance” (Duus 1998, 178–179; Woodall 2014, 62). Because many key developments – e.g., the appointment of a popularly elected party leader as prime minister in 1918 and the passage of the 1925 universal male suffrage bill – occurred during the reign of Emperor Taishō (1912–1926), Japan’s initial experiment with democracy bears his name. Although the period of Taishō Democracy failed to grow into full-fledged democratic governance, the period witnessed the expansion of popular rights, the enhancement of powers for elected representatives, and the adoption of Keynesian-esque fiscal policies and liberal diplomacy. It also saw the evolution of parliamentary institutions to such a degree that “the collective responsibility of the Cabinet [was] almost established” (Kitazawa 1929, 54; italics added).

Japan’s first attempt at democracy abruptly ended on May 15, 1932, when a group of naval cadets assassinated Prime Minister Inukai Tsuyoshi. Inukai was the last in a trio of
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elected politicians to head a prewar cabinet, and, for the next decade and a half, the premiership would be monopolized by a succession of generals and admirals and the occasional right-wing ideologue. While ultranationalists in the armed forces and civil society engaged in an orgy of bloodshed aptly dubbed “government by assassination,” the real agents of change proved to be techno-fascists who purposefully set about destroying the institutions of democracy and market capitalism (Byas 1942). Their leaders were “reform bureaucrats” and “control officers” – men such as Kishi Nobusuke (Ministry of Commerce), General Tōjō Hideki, and Ayukawa Yoshisuke (Nissan zaibatsu) – who believed in the virtues of central state planning that mobilized all the resources of an expanding empire. In addition to replacing the pusillanimous diplomacy of the previous era with an aggressively forged “New Order” in East Asia, these authoritarian rulers recast domestic institutions through a “New Structure” movement. Although national elections continued to be held until 1942, the House of Representatives was a hollow shell of its former self, and political parties had meekly dissolved and melded into the monolithic Imperial Rule Assistance Political Association (Woodall 2014, 77). When the expansionist policies pursued by these techno-fascist leaders crashed into the interests of Western colonial powers, the techno-fascists took the risky gamble of launching a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor and establishing a vast empire across East Asia and the Pacific. Less than four years later, the Japanese war machine and most of the country’s major cities had been reduced to smoldering rubble.

A second wave of democratization made landfall in September 1945 when General Douglas MacArthur assumed command of the U.S. military occupation of a defeated Japan. When the occupation began, few could have imagined the remarkable progress toward erecting democratic institutions that would be achieved in a relatively brief period of time. In this regard, the democratic achievements of the occupation and domestic leaders, such as long-time premier Yoshida Shigeru, were owed to a pair of factors – the support of a citizenry that ached for peace and an end to authoritarian rule, and the experience gained during the brief Taishō Democracy era. Perhaps, therefore, as Huntington observes, once the body politic becomes “infected with the democratic virus,” the society comes to believe that “a truly legitimate government had to be based on democratic practices” (Huntington 1991, 47). Whatever the case, the institutional reconfiguration brought forth under the occupation was every bit as sweeping as that erected by the Meiji oligarchs. Its pièce de résistance was the 1947 Constitution, which transformed the emperor into a “symbol,” established universal suffrage and the trappings of Westminster-style parliamentary democracy, renounced the sovereign right to wage war, and guaranteed an impressive array of civil liberties. Despite the fact that the Constitution was, in large measure, ghostwritten by occupation officials, the vast majority of Japanese citizens continue to embrace it.

Technically, postwar Japan became “democratic” on April 10, 1946, when, for the first time, all eligible men and women voted in honest and fair elections to select the country’s most powerful collective decision-makers. Yet even though periodic democratic elections for both houses of the postwar Diet became the rule, Japan’s sovereignty was not formally restored until April 1952. This makes it tricky to assess the process of democratic consolidation. Taking the restoration of sovereign as the starting point, Japan passed the “turnover test” in the aftermath of the general elections of February 1955, in which Yoshida’s Liberal Party turned over control to Hatoyama Ichirō’s Democratic Party. But, soon thereafter, the Liberal and Democratic Parties merged to form the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which proceeded to monopolize control of parliament through the next thirteen lower house elections held over the course of thirty-eight years. Viewed in the context of nearly four decades of uninterrupted LDP rule in what Masumi Junnosuke dubbed the “1955 system,” therefore, Japan did not
pass the “two-turnover test” until August 1993 (Masumi 1964). During this period, each of the fifteen prime ministers and ninety-nine percent of cabinet ministers were LDP-affiliated members of parliament (Woodall 2014, 118–124, 146–152). Under a lower house electoral system based upon the single nontransferable vote (SNTV) in multimember constituencies, the LDP remained a “federation of factions,” while the party’s supportive coalition of special interests – e.g., farmers, big and small businesspeople, doctors, postmasters, and construction contractors – swilled from a brimming barrel of government subsidies, targeted tax breaks, public works, and other forms of political pork (Grofman 1999, 379–393; Woodall 1996, 8–14). Meanwhile, a consequence of protracted LDP rule was the systematic exclusion of organized labor and environmental, women’s rights, antinuclear, taxpayers and consumers, and other interest groups that tended to support the opposition (Woodall 2014, 20).

Japan’s democratic evolution entered a new stage in August of 1993, when an eight-party coalition temporarily seized the reins of power from a scandal-ridden LDP. The most palpable contribution of this non-LDP coalition government was the replacement of the SNTV system in lower house elections with a parallel voting system that combined single-member and proportional representation constituencies. For the most part, however, coalition government became the rule, even after the LDP returned to power in June 1994, initially in partnership with the Japan Socialist Party, its nemesis under the “1955 system.” Because of the LDP’s inability to restore economic growth and extricate itself from a seemingly interminable succession of corruption scandals, the appeals of the Japan Democratic Party (DPJ) and other opposition parties began to resonate with voters. Yet this became a major problem in July 2007, when the opposition seized a majority of upper house seats. From July 2007 until December 2012, “twisted Diets” (nejire kokkai) – in which the governing party in the lower house confronted an opposition-controlled upper house – produced policy gridlock and a succession of short-lived governments (ibid, 201–202). In the midst of this, in August 2009, the DPJ became the party of power but struggled to deliver on platform promises because of ongoing economic malaise, bureaucratic resistance, and the daunting leadership challenges posed by the March 2011 earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear catastrophe. The LDP returned to power with the December 2012 lower house elections, which untwisted the Diet.

The second wave – South Korea

South Korean democracy was forged in a crucible of postcolonialism and Cold War real-politik. For more than two millennia, Korea was seen by China as a “tributary state” that was expected to kowtow to culturally superior benefactors in the Chinese imperial court. By the late nineteenth century, China’s Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) was in eclipse, and the Empire of Japan was bent on expansion. Its modern military forces easily prevailed in the Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895, which was sparked by rivalry over Korea. Similarly, Great Power rivalry on the Korean Peninsula touched off the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, which relegated Korea to the status of a protectorate – and, five years later, a colony – in what would become Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere. Although Korean independence demanded some democratizing changes – e.g., in the 1918 “March First Movement” (sam-il undong) – no significant progress was made toward establishing democratic institutions (Cumings 2005, 154–162). Japan’s defeat in World War II resulted in a peninsula partitioned along the 38th Parallel, with the Soviet Union exercising dominion over the north and the United States exercising dominion over the south. Under this arrangement, civil war was inevitable, and the inevitable became reality on June 25, 1950. Three bloody years later, an armistice brought a ceasefire but no peace treaty.
The Republic of Korea (ROK) of the late 1940s and early 1950s was one of the world’s poorest countries, deeply dependent on American economic aid and military protection. While South Koreans rejoiced at Japan’s defeat, for the next three years, the U.S. Army Military Government in Korea ruled the country. In the meantime, Rhee Syngman – a long-exiled leader of the Korean independence movement – was flown to Seoul on General MacArthur’s private airplane shortly after Japan’s surrender (ibid, 195). The fact that Rhee was Christian, U.S.-educated, and staunchly anti-communist stood him in good stead with Washington’s power elite. On July 20, 1948, the National Assembly elected Rhee as the ROK’s first president, and he proceeded to surround himself with a “kitchen cabinet” composed mostly of Americans or Koreans who had spent many years in the United States (ibid, 214). He also lavished benefits on business world cronies and repeatedly vowed to “March North” (bukjin tongil) to reunify the peninsula (Heo and Roehrig 2014, 29). While Washington worried that his saber rattling could drag the United States into an unwanted war, the corruption put on display by the Rhee regime brought forth a student-led protest movement (Haggard 1990, 60). In reality, the First Republic (1948–1960) never amounted to anything more than a “semidemocratic civilian regime” (Huntington 1991, 73), and, in 1956, Rhee, then eighty-one years old, further augmented his executive powers by cajoling the National Assembly into removing the three-term presidential limit.

South Korea's first attempt at democratic governance was fleeting, and yet a pretense of democracy continued under semidemocratic institutional arrangements. Essentially running unopposed, Rhee easily was elected to a fourth term on March 15, 1960. While accusations of corruption in the presidential election led to protests, allegations of ballot box-stuffing in the election of Lee Ki-poong, Rhee’s protégé and vice-presidential running mate, proved to be the spark that detonated the powder keg. Student-led protests spread across the country, and, on April 19th, police fired into a crowd of 100,000 protestors gathered in front of the presidential residence, killing at least 115 people (Cumings 2005, 349). This was the final straw for Washington, and, on April 26th, Rhee flew into Hawaiian exile aboard a CIA-operated aircraft, while Vice President Lee, his wife, and their two sons carried out a suicide pact.

The “April Revolution” opened the door to “Korea’s first democratic regime,” the ephemeral Second Republic (1960–1961), with a prime minister and “responsible cabinet,” a robust bicameral National Assembly, and a president who played the largely ceremonial role of “head of state” (ibid, 351). But this all changed on May 16, 1961, when a group of military officers led by General Park Chung-hee decided that the government of Prime Minister Chang Myon had had more than enough time to rein in inflation, crime, and social protest. Naturally, Park claimed that the seizure of power by his military junta was a temporary expediency to maintain order, while the armed services rectified the social and economic problems (Chang 2015, 16).

Although the May 16 coup d’état placed power in the hands of the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, Park soon became the leading figure in a “semidemocratic military regime” (Huntington 1991, 73). Unlike Rhee, who believed that economic planning is what communists do, Park had no qualms in directing a forced-draft program of export-led industrialization under successive five-year plans (Korea Times, April 18, 2010). Having seen how government and private industry can work hand in hand during his days as an army officer in the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, Park offered strategic rewards to the major chaebol – large industrial groups, such as Hyundai and Samsung – that supported his economic plans (Woo 1991, 169). In addition, he created strong state institutions, such as the Economic Planning Board and the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), which devolved into a “complete rogue institution” that brutally suppressed any perceived
threat to the regime (Cumings 2005, 368–372; Oberdorfer and Carlin 2014, 34–36). Under the “Third Republic” (1963–1972), Park turned in his army uniform for civilian attire to narrowly defeat Yun Boseon in the 1963 presidential election. Park won by a wider margin in 1967 and then forced the National Assembly to scrap the two-term presidential limit, clearing a path to a third term in 1971. In fact, between 1967 and 1971, the National Assembly dutifully rubber-stamped each and every one of the 306 administration-sponsored bills submitted for its consideration (Cumings 2005, 361). Then, in 1972, Park abruptly declared a state of emergency, dissolved the National Assembly, and suspended the Constitution in response to U.S. President Richard M. Nixon’s announcement that America’s Asian allies would have to bear a greater burden for their own defense. Park proceeded to call a public referendum to approve the “Yushin Constitution,” which, in essence, made him dictator for life under the Fourth Republic (1972–1981).

And so it was that the “second reverse wave” washed away the institutional foundation of the ROK’s brief experiment with democracy. Park ran unopposed in 1972 and 1978, while the KCIA rabidly thrashed about, punishing the regime’s enemies, including opposition leader Kim Dae-jung. Meanwhile, Christian churches became havens for Park’s critics, and labor unrest mounted as the economy slowed in the wake of the 1979 “oil shock.” Domestic tensions crested in August 1979 after police brutally broke up a strike by female workers at the YH Trading Company, a maker of wigs for export. When some of the striking workers fled to the headquarters of an opposition party, hundreds of policemen stormed the building, killing one worker and injuring many others (ibid, 378). This ignited protests in the southeastern industrial cities of Masan and Busan. In the midst of this tense situation, on October 26, Kim Chae-gyu, the head of the KCIA, assassinated Park at a dinner held on the grounds of the presidential compound. Prime Minister Choi Kyu-hah assumed the mantle of acting president, but General Chun Doo-hwan and members of a military faction composed largely of alumni of the Korea Military Academy’s Class of 1955 seized power in a December 12 coup d’état. Chun then had himself appointed KCIA Director, declared nationwide martial law, dissolved political parties, and ordered the closing of universities and the arrest of dissidents. He installed General Roh Tae-woo, his protégé, and other allies – a large number of whom hailed from his home region of Daegu and Gyeongsang – in key government and military posts (Kil 2010, 28, 59).

The draconian measures employed by the Chun regime under the Fifth Republic (1981–1987) differed little from those of the Park regime. Yet an expanding middle class was growing weary of authoritarian rule, and, on May 18, 1980, the regime sent troops to brutally suppress protests that had erupted in the southern city of Gwangju. After hundreds of protestors were slaughtered, the people of Gwangju managed to temporarily drive out the soldiers. But the Chun regime dispatched a larger, better-disciplined army division, which arrived on May 27th and spared no mercy in retaking the city (Cumings 2005, 382–383). The carnage of Gwangju would create an enduring crisis of legitimacy for Chun, who, nevertheless, had himself elected president (with a 99.99 percent Electoral College vote!) in August 1980. Student-led protests now drew in discontented workers, Christians, and ordinary middle-class citizens. The U.S. Government pressured Chun to mend his authoritarian ways, and, with the 1988 Seoul Olympics on the horizon, the regime’s leaders understood that they could ill afford the fallout from another Gwangju Massacre. But Chun’s decision to pass the presidential baton to Roh – which became public knowledge in the spring of 1987 – touched off nationwide protests. As Bruce Cumings explains, Roh astutely saved the day in a June 29th television broadcast by promising to permit the direct popular presidential elections, respect civil liberties and human rights, and release political prisoners (ibid, 392).
As a result of the December 16th election – the freest and fairest in ROK history up until that time – Roh narrowly prevailed over the two main opposition candidates, the “two Kims” (i.e., Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam), who were unable to join forces. With this, a wave of enduring democratic reform arrived on South Korean shores.

Under the Sixth Republic (1987 to present), South Korean democracy has steadily progressed toward consolidation. In January 1990, President Roh and the “two Kims” melded their respective parties into the Democratic Liberal Party (DLP). The ROK passed the “turnover test” in December 1997, when the DLP’s Kim Young-sam (who had been elected president five years earlier) passed the presidential baton to Kim Dae-jung and his National Congress Party. The depoliticization of the military became reality during Kim Young-sam’s presidential term, while a “Sunshine Policy” that brought a temporary thaw to inter-Korean relations became the trademark of Kim Dae-jung’s presidency. In 1996, the ROK was admitted to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development – the “rich man’s club” of industrialized democracies – and managed to nimbly bounce back from the “Asian financial crisis” that struck the following year. Since the inception of the Sixth Republic, the National Assembly has grown into a meaningful legislative organ, civil liberties have expanded, and a robust civil society has emerged. Despite North Korea’s repeated nuclear weapons detonations, ballistic missile tests, and other provocative acts, there is no evidence to suggest that South Korean democracy is on anything other than solid ground. Moreover, the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye – whose embroilment in an expansive corruption scandal led to her removal from office in peaceful compliance with a March 2017 ruling by the Constitutional Court – further attests to the deepening institutionalization of democracy.

The third wave – Taiwan

Taiwan – like South Korea and many other late developing countries – did not inherit any meaningful democratic institutions or structures. But unlike South Korea and also Japan – both of which were briefly exposed to democracy before falling prey to “reverse waves” – Taiwan had never been “infected with the democratic virus.” Consequently, whatever degree of democratization Taiwan has thus far attained is an almost wholly new development.

Historically, Taiwan, with its aboriginal population augmented by waves of immigrants from the mainland, was seen by the rulers of Qing China as an unruly island territory that produced “every three years an uprising, every five years a revolution.” Along the way, the Dutch got treated to a taste of this unruliness, as did the Japanese, who, in 1895, acquired Taiwan as the spoils of victory in the Sino-Japanese War. Nevertheless, as Shelly Rigger explains, “Japan viewed the island as an opportunity to prove its bona fides as a rival to imperialist powers in Europe,” and, despite having to brutally suppress some local uprisings, the Japanese endeavored to render Taiwan into a showcase colony (Rigger 2011, 3). To the extent that Taiwan entered the postwar era with any sort of democratic legacy, it was the SNTV system for electing local assembly members that was installed in 1935 under Japanese colonial rule.

Unfortunately, Taiwan’s pathway to democracy proved to be steep, treacherous, and uncertain. Following Japan’s surrender in September 1945, the U.S. placed Taiwan under the administrative control of Nationalist Party (Kuomintang or KMT) government of Chiang Kai-shek’s Republic of China, which was locked in civil war with Mao Zedong’s Communist forces. Nationalist Party forces began arriving in Taiwan in October 1945, and immediately alarmed the local population with their rag-tag appearance and fondness for pillaging.
Chen Yi, Chiang’s crony, was appointed Governor General, overseeing an administration that excelled at corruption, incompetence, and an inability to rein in crime and inflation. On February 27, 1947 – with local Taiwanese discontent toward rule by KMT mainlanders already running high – Monopoly Bureau agents manhandled a widow trying to sell cigarettes from a portable stand in a Taipei park (Kerr 1965, 254–255). A bystander was shot and killed, sparking protests that had, by the next day, spread across the island. Unable to restore order, Chen imposed martial law – which, as it turned out, would not be lifted for thirty-eight years – while reinforcements dispatched from the mainland arrived to slaughter numerous protestors and imprisoned thousands more. The “228 Massacre” and the decades-long “white terror” suppression of dissidents that followed would feed an already “deep reservoir of Taiwanese discontent” toward authoritarian rule by a mainlander regime (Roy 2003, 67). Nevertheless, the KMT did allow local elections that were “competitive, real, and local interests-based,” which, as time would tell, gave the Taiwanese a taste of democracy (Cheng 1989, 478).

On December 10, 1949, Chiang Kai-shek transported his KMT government – with two million refugees in tow – to Taiwan as China “fell” to Communist forces. Because the KMT regime clung to the claim that it was the legitimate government of all of China, it foisted an additional “China-wide” administrative apparatus on top of “Island-wide” provincial administrative institutions, such as the Taiwan Provincial Assembly (Rigger 1999, 6). Decades later, this would become a bone of contention for democratizing forces. In the meantime, the KMT erected an institutional infrastructure inspired by the ideas of Dr Sun Yat Sen with five branches of government in the form of Administrative, Control, Examination, Executive, Judicial, and Legislative “yuan.” The KMT ruled Taiwan through a Soviet Union-inspired “Leninist regime” that, as T.J. Cheng explains, utilized mass organizations “to mobilize support from large segments of the population for the national tasks that the regime imposed on society” (1989, 477). The KMT justified its authoritarian single-party rule – indeed, only two minor “opposition” parties were permitted to exist – by pointing to an incessant threat from the mainland and the need to “tutor” the Taiwanese masses in the ways of democracy, a necessary evil suggested in Sun’s writings. From the 1950s through the mid-1970s, Chiang played the part of dictator, and the hardline views of the KMT’s ultra-rightist conservative wing steered government policy (ibid, 497). As export-driven growth transformed society, however, middle-class intellectuals became the vanguard of a growing movement for liberal democracy (ibid, 483). The United Nations’ expulsion of Taiwan in 1971 and Chiang’s death four years later added additional impetus to an opening for change.

Taiwan’s democratic transition unfolded haltingly over the course of the next two decades. It surprised many when Chiang Ching-kuo (whose resume suggested a conservative hardliner), who succeeded his father, initiated a process of liberalizing reform, which elevated many native Taiwanese to positions of authority (ibid, 485; Roy 2003, 157). In 1977, an opposition movement known as the “Tangwai” (outside the party) prevailed over the KMT for the first time ever in local elections. Two years later, the KMT regime brutally silenced pro-democracy protestors in the southern city of Kaohsiung, drawing condemnation from the world community. Then, in 1986, the regime allowed the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) to organize and to field candidates in elections. The following year, Chiang brought an end to nearly four decades of martial law and allowed citizens to make family visits to the mainland. After Chiang passed away in 1988, his protégé, Taiwan-born Lee Tung-hui, launched a “Taiwanization” policy that dismantled many KMT-imposed structures and allowed civilian authorities to gain the upper hand over the military (Rigger 2011, 10). Direct elections for the National Assembly in 1991 finally brought an end to the
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infamous “long parliament,” whose members had been elected on the mainland in the 1940s but had held their seats ever since because the constituents that had elected them were now in areas under Beijing’s control.

A wave of democratic change crashed onto Taiwan’s shoreline on March 23, 1996, when KMT candidate and incumbent president Lee Teng-hui defeated the DPP’s Peng Min-ming in the freest, fairest, and cleanest presidential election in the Island’s history. In November 1997, the DPP outpolled the KMT in elections for county and city representatives, marking the first time that opposition party candidates prevailed in a nationwide contest (ibid, 2). Taiwan passed the “turnover test” with the March 2000 presidential election, which saw the KMT hand over control of the presidency to the DPP’s Chen Shui-bian, and, in so doing, brought down the curtain on a half-century of KMT rule (ibid, 12). In November 2001, Taiwan relaxed trade relations with the mainland, and, in elections held the following year, the KMT lost its parliamentary majority for the first time. Taiwan passed the “two turnover test” on March 22, 2008, when the opposition KMT’s Ma Ying-jeou defeated the DPP’s candidate in the presidential election. Four months later, President Ma apologized for the KMT’s authoritarian abuses during the “white terror” period. In November 2015, President Ma met with China’s President Xi Jinping in Singapore, the first-ever summit between the two country’s heads of state. But even this was not enough to stave off defeat for the KMT, as DPP candidate Tsai Ing-wen emerged victorious in the January 2016 presidential election. President Tsai became East Asia’s second female head of state, following in the footsteps of South Korea’s Park Geun-hye, who was elected in December 2012.

East Asian democratization – why and whither?

Having explored the how of East Asian democratization, it is possible now to briefly contemplate the why and whither. Why did Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan – three East Asian neighbors – democratize? Did common factors propel the processes of democratic transition and democratic consolidation? Or were sui generis contextual forces responsible for bringing forth democracy? The answers to these why questions prompt consideration of whither. What is the future of East Asian democracy? To what extent have democratic institutions and structures become established in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan? Is democracy in any or all of these countries vulnerable to reverse waves of the kind that washed away the first attempts at democratization in Japan and South Korea? And, finally, what are the prospects for a fourth wave, one that might bring democracy to China or even North Korea?

The East Asian story attests to the fact that there is no one single cause of democratization. Rather, a central lesson of the three cases scrutinized in this chapter is that common forces combine with sui generis contextual forces to produce democratic transition and consolidation. A sui generis feature of the Japanese case was the conscious effort put forth by the Meiji oligarchy to demonstrate civility to secure revision of “unequal treaties” – with fixed tariff rates, extraterritoriality, and “treaty ports” – imposed by the Western powers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Even though the 1890 Meiji Constitution was painstakingly crafted to keep the democratic genie inside the bottle, the fact that elections were allowed at all created a lever for disadvantaged groups to press their grievances. In the case of South Korea, U.S. pressure to improve human rights and the existence of a sizable number of Christian citizens – indeed, even the military juntas feared to molest the churches for fear of alienating Western allies – gave added impetus to calls for democratic reform, especially with the eyes of the world trained upon the approaching 1988 Seoul Olympics. And the resentment of citizens born and raised in Taiwan toward an oppressive, condescending
mainlander KMT regime created fertile ground from which demands for democracy would burst forth.

East Asian democratization has been spurred by three common causes. First, in each country, occupation by a foreign power established at least a façade of democracy, granting elections that provided pulpits from which disadvantaged interests could voice their displeasure with the status quo. In the Japanese and South Korean cases, a U.S. military occupation played this role, while, in the case of Taiwan, the mainlander KMT regime was compelled to establish a democratic veneer to justify its claim to represent “Free China.” Second, export-led growth raised living standards, expanded educational attainment, and otherwise nurtured a growing middle class that desired the freedoms enjoyed by middle-class citizens in other democratic nations. In other words, there was a “snowballing” or bandwagon effect whereby Japanese, South Korean, and Taiwanese citizens came to covet the lifestyles and civil liberties enjoyed by their counterparts elsewhere. Third, regimes in each of the three East Asian countries confronted expanding challenges to their legitimacy. By the early 1990s, Japan’s perpetually ruling LDP was teetering amidst a succession of corruption scandals and media criticism of its ineffective economic policies. Meanwhile, the legitimacy of both the South Korean military junta and Taiwan’s Leninist KMT regime was vulnerable to domestic backlash from the institutional memory of events such as the Gwangju Massacre and the “white terror.”

In sum, each of the three waves of democratization brought democratic change to East Asia. The first wave ushered in Japan’s initial attempt at democracy, the second brought South Korea’s maiden experiment, while the third opened the door to Taiwan’s democratization. While none of these three states are invulnerable to a reverse wave, in each of them, democratic institutions and structures have become sufficiently institutionalized as to require something akin to a perfect storm to wash them away. Perhaps the greatest threat to democracy in East Asia is posed by rising regional tensions over disputed islands and maritime routes and the possibility that these tensions will generate revanchist populism.

Yet, as Huntington argues, “time is on the side of democracy” (1991, 316). Indeed, while history does not move in a straight line, its ratchet-like trajectory has, in the longue durée, tended to lead toward a democratic future. This has been the plot line in the unfolding drama that has been – and continues to be – East Asian democratization. While it is impossible to deny the possibility of a reverse wave, this seems unlikely at least in the near term. What cannot be denied, though, is that the degree to which democracy has taken hold in East Asia is greater today than at any time in the region’s lengthy history.

Notes
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There are parallels between the case of the Taiwanese widow and Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian fruit vendor whose self-immolation after being humiliated by local authorities is credited with sparking the Arab Spring.

Bibliography


