South Korea was one of the great anomalies of the twentieth century. During the period after World War II, dozens of new states in Asia and Africa gained their independence from colonialism. Many of them aspired to achieve rapid economic development and a workable form of democratic government. But by the end of the twentieth century, despite expansive American involvement in many cases, the vast majority of the post-colonial world continued to live in relative poverty, with less than a handful of states enjoying stable democracy. What made South Korea different? Why did it ultimately achieve a stable democratic government when so many other new states faced with similar circumstances failed?

No one factor can answer these questions completely. In fact the process of democratization in South Korea during the years between 1945, when Korea was liberated from Japanese colonialism, and 1987, when South Korea’s military government agreed to step aside and allow free elections, was a complex one with a wide variety of different contributing factors. Nevertheless, there are certain features of South Korea’s history during this period that undoubtedly played a critical role in shaping the process. This essay examines the most important of these: the role of the United States, rapid economic development, and South Korean agency. It considers the importance of each of these three factors while offering a basic narrative of the key historical developments in South Korea’s democratization.

Most of the existing literature on democratization in South Korea has taken a somewhat different approach. It has tended to put less emphasis on the role of outside actors and greater emphasis on the role of domestic forces. In particular, it has emphasized how different groups such as workers, women or ordinary people influenced or were influenced by South Korea’s democratic transformation (Armstrong 2006; Oh 1999; Shin 2014; S. Kim 2003). Much of this literature has primarily seen democratization as a sort of ground-up process driven primarily by the people. The United States is often viewed as a counterproductive force that hindered the emergence of South Korean democracy. But there are limitations to this approach. Korea did not have any democratic tradition before it was liberated from Japan in 1945, and Koreans had limited experience with democratic institutions. While it is argued here that Koreans struggled valiantly to turn their country into a democracy, the overall process cannot be understood without looking at a combination of internal and external factors and understanding the role Americans played in introducing democratic ideas and concepts.
First, however, it is important to explain what is meant by democracy in this essay. I have generally used the term as a shorthand, not for simple one-person, one-vote democracy, but for what might be called liberal democracy. Liberal democracy does not simply mean one-person, one-vote majority rule. Rather it is a form of democracy that is based on liberal principles including respect for the civil liberties of both the majority and the minority and equality before the law. Elections are free, fair and openly contested by candidates representing genuinely different positions on key issues (Zakaria 2003: 17). This was the kind of democracy that South Koreans came to aspire to and this is what they would ultimately manage to overcome the odds and achieve by the end of the twentieth century.

In the beginning

Very few observers walking through the newly created Republic of Korea in 1948 would have given the country a very good chance of blossoming into a stable democracy in little more than a generation. At the time, South Korea was, to many, little more than a backwards “rump state.” The end of Japanese colonialism three years earlier had created tremendous economic dislocation throughout the Korean Peninsula; the division of the country into separate northern and southern states had served only to exacerbate the situation. To many Koreans at the time, subsistence and survival were the most important things (Brazinsky 2007: 32). Although Korean elites had aspirations to build a democracy similar to the ones that existed in Europe, the majority of Koreans had never lived under a democracy of any form and had virtually no experience with the procedural and civic aspects of democratic life.

The years between 1945 and 1948 had been chaotic ones for Korea politically in which the peninsula was divided—occupied by the Soviet Union and the United States and, against the will of the vast majority of the Korean people, forced to accept division into two separate states. The inability of Washington and Moscow to reach a compromise that would reunify their zones of occupation through holding elections for the entire Korean Peninsula led to the intervention of the United Nations and to separate elections in the north and south. Unfortunately, neither of these elections offered the Koreans who participated in them a very positive introduction to the virtues of democratic life. The Americans and the Soviets skewed the political processes in their respective spheres of influence in such a way that only their own political allies could emerge triumphant (Lee 2013: 29–31).

In the South, it was Syngman Rhee that seized the reins of political power with no small measure of American assistance. Americans had forged an alliance of convenience with Rhee for two key reasons: he was a devout anti-communist and, unlike many other conservatives in Korea whose reputations were tarnished by past collaboration with Japanese colonialism, Rhee had genuine credentials as a nationalist and leader of the early Korean independence movement. In an election that was largely boycotted by the political left, Rhee was elected the first president of the newly inaugurated Republic of Korea (ROK) in July 1948. Although the new government formed under Rhee’s leadership was formally democratic with a constitution and popularly elected National Assembly, the new president found ways to sharply limit political freedom and strengthen his own grip on power. He used the power of political patronage to award those who were most loyal to him. One American report on the new president’s cabinet appointments noted that there had been a “lack of any attempt to include in the present Government varying opinions or political groups” (Brazinsky 2007:18).

Although Americans were deeply ambivalent about Rhee, they felt trapped into supporting him. During the first five years of its existence, South Korea confronted dire security threats, including domestic insurgency and a devastating war launched by the competing government
in the north. Even after the Korean War ended, many feared that the armistice would not hold. In this context, American officials believed that there was little that they could do but tolerate Rhee’s authoritarianism despite the fact that he frequently made a mockery of US pretensions to be defending and assisting a “Free World” country. Doing otherwise, they feared, might bring about dangerous instability and lead to a communist takeover.

The end result of American tolerance for Rhee’s authoritarian tendencies was the persistence of what at times seemed little more than a police state in South Korea until the president was overthrown in April 1960. Rhee took advantage of the emergency wartime situation to enlarge his own powers and make it possible for himself to seek multiple terms as president instead of the one term specified by the constitution. The president kept strict control over the national police and used it for paramilitary operations and intimidating his opponents. Rhee also encouraged the formation of notorious right-wing youth groups that sometimes attacked journalists or political figures who dissented against his regime. Although the Republic of Korea never developed into the kind of totalitarian state that existed north of the thirty-eighth parallel, the prospects for democracy appeared far from promising during its early years (Brazinsky, 2007: 104–106). But even if South Korea’s government remained authoritarian, democratic forces slowly began to emerge with American encouragement.

Promoting democracy

America’s role in South Korean politics during the 1950s was in many ways a paradoxical one. There can be no question that American support for Syngman Rhee—reluctant as it may have been in some instances—proved critical to the formation and maintenance of an authoritarian state structure throughout the 1950s. At the same time, however, American officials hoped that South Korea would not remain permanently saddled with an authoritarian government like the one Rhee presided over. They looked forward to the time when Rhee would leave office. More importantly, they attempted to encourage democracy in South Korea from the bottom up through a variety of educational and cultural programs. Not all of these programs had the precise effect that was intended, and South Koreans never envisioned their democracy in the same way that Americans did. Nevertheless, these programs did help to establish some social structures and gave rise to new ideas that helped to encourage democracy in the long term.

Many of these programs were launched as part of a broader US-led international effort to aid and reconstruct South Korea in the wake of the Korean War. The country was materially devastated after three years of brutal conflict with the north. Its industries lay in shambles, orphans numbered in the thousands, and destruction to homes and other property totaled hundreds of millions of dollars. During the decade after the Korean War, aiding South Korea became an important priority for both the United States and the United Nations. Washington established the United States Operations Mission in South Korea and gave it an annual budget of several hundred million dollars to carry out aid programs in different fields. At the same time, the United Nations Korea Reconstruction Agency (UNKRA) was established under the auspices of the UN, though Americans played a significant role in shaping the agenda for this organization as well. The stated goal of these organizations was generally to provide economic relief from the devastation caused by the war. But in doing so they inevitably sought to transfer new ways of thinking that could encourage democratization as well.

An important case in point was in the ROK’s educational system. If Koreans were to become democratic citizens, Americans believed, then they needed to be educated and schools needed to guide them in the participatory aspects of democratic life. Koreans hungered for better education but opportunities were limited during and after the war. At the most basic level,
many of the school buildings had been destroyed during the war or converted to military barracks. In many instances, there simply were no physical structures that could be used for schooling. At the same time, the educational curriculum left much to be desired. Under Japanese colonialism, the schools had often served the purpose of assimilating Koreans into the Japanese empire (S. Kim and Caprio 2009: 33–43). Although the U.S. military occupation had initiated some educational reforms, the task was far from complete by the time the war started. In the aftermath of the war, both aiding in the reconstruction of schools and revising the education curricula became important priorities for many aid agencies. A vast expansion of educational opportunity occurred in South Korea as a result of these reconstruction efforts. American and UN agencies supplied materials for classroom construction, paper for printing textbooks and numerous other basic items needed to provide basic educational opportunities. The UNKRA assumed a large share of the responsibility for constructing new schools and classrooms. Through the organization’s efforts, more than 12,000 new classrooms were built in 1952–1953 in the ROK. As a result, primary school attendance grew from 2.4 million pupils in 1948 to 3.7 million in 1961. The number of students attending middle and high schools in South Korea also experienced a dramatic growth during these years (Brazinsky 2007: 43–47).

American aid agencies did not stop at merely helping to build schools, they also sought to influence the curriculum. Democratic concepts were incorporated into textbooks, while new teaching methods designed to create a democratic citizenry were introduced to teachers (Brazinsky 2007: 46–50). Not all of these reforms had the intended effect. Many Americans sent to work with Korean teachers were dismayed that instructional methods did not actually change very much. Nevertheless, these changes made it possible for South Korean students to learn about democracy even if they could not experience it directly under Syngman Rhee’s rule. This was important given the rapidly growing number of students at all levels in South Korea.

The numerous US official and private agencies active in South Korea during the post-war period also aimed to contribute to the country’s democratization through cultivating South Korean journalists. Americans believed that a free press was a prerequisite to a democratic society in the long run and sought to assure that one came into being in the ROK. The United States aided many pro-democracy journals that were openly critical of the Rhee government such as Sasanggye (World of Thought). The United States Information Agency (USIA) even initiated special tours of the United States for leading journalists and publishers. The idea behind such programs was to give media leaders the opportunity to see how the press functioned in a democratic society. Once they had the opportunity to witness the workings of the American media first hand, they would be more eager to help bring a free and democratic press to Korea. Here too, the United States seems to have had an impact as South Korean journalists became increasingly critical of their government over the course of the 1950s, despite Rhee’s efforts to keep them in check (Brazinsky 2007: 52–58).

Finally, Americans recognized that if South Korea was to eventually transition to democracy, it would be necessary for the country to have civil servants dedicated to improving the function of the government. The United States therefore launched numerous programs to help train government officials and bureaucrats. The idea was to reach out to younger, uncorrupted civil servants and politicians that might eventually become the core of a more efficient, more democratic government. During the 1950s and 1960s, the Leaders Program operated by the USIA brought numerous South Korean assemblymen and local officials to the United States for tours, including future president Kim Dae Jung. The Ford Foundation arranged for many talented South Korean bureaucrats to attend special training programs at the Economic Development Institute in Washington (Brazinsky 2007: 59–67).
American activities in South Korea could not produce democracy overnight, however. What they produced instead was greater tension between the government and elites. As the Rhee government grew even more despotic during the late 1950s, a rising generation of South Korean elites who had been exposed to ideas about democracy in schools, in the media and through contacts with the outside world became more dissatisfied. As a new decade dawned, South Korea was ripe for revolution.

From 19 April to 16 May

The chain of events that would lead to the demise of Syngman Rhee’s government began during the spring of 1960. Although he was over eighty years old and bordering on senile, Rhee refused to let go of political power. During a presidential election held in March, Rhee’s henchmen launched a widespread campaign of ballot stuffing and destruction of opposition ballots. When the “results” of the election were announced and Rhee, despite his growing unpopularity, had somehow garnered over 80 percent of the votes, elite discontent began to spread rapidly. On 11 April, the body of a student who had been tortured by the police was suddenly found in the harbor in the southern city of Masan. When news reached the capital between 18–19 April, increasingly widespread student protests against the government began. Over the next few days, the protests continued to grow in scope and intensity, reaching the point where they threatened to throw the entire country into chaos. Facing increasing pressure both domestically and from the United States, Rhee finally stepped down on 25 April. Free elections, which ultimately turned the government over to the opposition Democratic Party were held in July (Henderson 1968: 174–181).

For a brief period of time, the possibility of more genuine democracy appeared to take hold in South Korea. The newly elected prime minister, Chang Myŏn, presided over the ROK’s first local elections in Korean history in December 1960. South Koreans went to the polls to choose new provincial governors and a new mayor of Seoul. Freedom of expression and assembly blossomed. Moreover, the Chang government implemented some significant economic reforms that promised to break up the system of cronyism and corruption that had enabled Syngman Rhee to remain in power (Henderson 1968: 180–181).

The new, democratic South Korean government led by Chang Myŏn survived less than one year, however. Despite its good intentions, its leadership was inexperienced and reluctant to use force. Demonstrations by radical student groups became increasingly common during the months after the revolution, and Chang’s government seemed unable to keep them under control. Nor did Chang have much success at alleviating the economic misery that had come to plague South Korea during the Syngman Rhee years. Both inflation and unemployment continued to grow under his leadership. Moreover, factionalism swiftly developed within the ruling Democratic Party due to disagreements between Chang and the president, Yun Po-sŏn. It did not take long for both American officials and South Korean citizens to begin to lose faith in the new South Korean government. According to a poll taken several months after Chang took office, the prime minister enjoyed the unreserved support of only 3.7 percent of South Korea’s population. (Henderson, 1968: 180–81). Americans and their conservative allies in South Korea feared that North Korea might take advantage of the chaos to reunify the country.

Chang Myŏn’s government survived for less than a year. As Chang struggled to manage the economy and implement fundamental policies, South Korea’s formidable military grew increasingly impatient with civilian government. During the previous decade, the ROK Army had grown enormously both in size and influence thanks to massive American support during and after the Korean War. By the late 1950s, thousands of military officers had traveled to the...
United States to receive special training. Moreover, the size and complexity of the ROK Army assured that those serving in it at the highest levels gained the kind of administrative experience that was lacking among most of South Korea’s civilian leaders. As Chang Myŏn’s government struggled to maintain order and launch South Korea on the path to economic development, the army looked on and became increasingly frustrated with the ineffectiveness of the civilian government (Brazinsky 2007: 84–100).

On 16 May 1961, Major General Park Chung Hee (Pak Chŏng-hŭi) launched a bloodless coup d’état that swiftly ended democratic government in South Korea. Although Chang had heard rumors that such a coup was likely to occur, his government had few alternatives once Park managed to gain the support of the military. Once the coup had succeeded, Park temporarily assumed the post of Chairman of the Supreme Council for National Revolution (SCNR), and he would use the council to govern the ROK for the next two years. Although American officials on the ground in South Korea initially wanted to see civilian government restored, the Kennedy Administration soon came to support Park’s government, partially because it recognized that the chairman was deeply committed to restoring stability and promoting economic development. With the military now in control of South Korean politics, the country would go through a period of rapid social, economic and political change.

Park Chung Hee: development and democracy

Park Chung Hee dominated South Korean politics for the next two decades. After ruling the country through the SCNR for two years, Park allowed free presidential elections in 1963, in part because he was pressured constantly by the Kennedy Administration to do so. Until 1972, elections continued to be held in South Korea, although the outcomes, while not completely predetermined, were heavily influenced by Park and his political allies. Under Park’s rule, a complex system of favoritism was established in which the government offered preferential treatment for certain business conglomerates (or chaebŏl) and the chaebŏl in turn rewarded Park’s political party with donations and other forms of largesse. The president also established the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) as a powerful weapon that could be used to intimidate and control his opposition. Thus, on election days, Park’s opponents could receive votes and members of the opposition party were elected to the National Assembly (though they were always the minority), but the likelihood of Park or his party suffering a major loss under these conditions was very low. In 1972, Park suddenly abrogated the ROK constitution, however, and announced the creation of the new Yusin (meaning literally “revitalization”) System. Yusin was a harsh new system of authoritarian repression that placed strict limits on freedom of speech, introduced new methods of political repression, and essentially made Park the permanent president.

Park Chung Hee clearly did not make establishing a viable democracy in South Korea one of his top priorities. Although he allowed free elections and some measure of dissent for some of the time that he was in power, for the most part he was mistrustful of democratic institutions and suspicious of American efforts to foist them upon South Korea. At the same time, however, during his nearly two decades in power Park did help to create socio-economic conditions that would eventually make democracy more tenable than it had been when he gained power. Park’s most notable achievement was, of course, that he managed to pull his nation out of the economic malaise that it was suffering from and launch it on a course of rapid economic development. When Park seized power, the Republic of Korea was still one of the poorest countries in the world and its per capita income was lower than that of many newly independent African countries. By the time Park was assassinated in 1979, South Korea’s per capita income had grown from
around $80 to $3,000. The economy had averaged miraculous double-digit growth rates throughout the 1960s and 1970s. South Korea’s industrialization and economic growth are covered elsewhere in this volume, so they will not be covered in detail here. What needs to be mentioned, however, is the way that this economic development contributed to the country’s eventual democratization.

The rapid economic development that occurred during the Park Chung Hee years contributed to South Korea’s democratization in several key ways. First, throughout human history there has been an established connection between the expansion of economic opportunity and the development of political liberty. One does not always lead to the other. Nevertheless, one might say that economic opportunity is constitutive of political liberty—meaning that it has the power to bring political liberty into being. When Park Chung Hee seized power in 1961, South Korea was still primarily an economic society. Most people had little choice other than to make their living from the land as previous generations had done. By the end of Park Chung Hee’s rule, this was no longer true. During the 1970s Park had also launched an economic program known as the “big push,” under which the South Korean economy transitioned from light manufacturing to heavy industries. The “big push” enabled the ROK to continue its rapid economic growth and diversify its economy (Woo 1991: 118–147).

Industrialization helped to spur the growth of both labor and the middle class in South Korea, while creating new economic choices. Moreover, although students continued to be one of the most radical groups in South Korea, Park had realized that a strong education system was necessary if he wanted to turn his nation into an economic success story. Educational opportunities had continued to expand at all levels.

What did all of this rapid economic growth mean for the typical South Korean? Of course, not everybody benefited equally. Nevertheless, in 1979, ambitious young South Koreans had a far greater chance to fulfill their aspirations for a better education and a middle class job than any previous generation. This change was a dramatic one that transformed the mentality of large segments of the population. It did not, in and of itself, lead to democracy. Nevertheless, it was natural for South Koreans who now had more economic choices to crave greater political freedoms. The emergence of these new classes also attenuated the state’s power. The government continued to do everything that it could to simultaneously foster and control the growth of large industries. But as industries grew larger, they eventually became loci of power in their own right. This combination of alternative centers of power and greater expectations among younger South Koreans unquestionably created some of the preconditions that would eventually lead to a political transformation.

Park Chung Hee also helped to create the enabling conditions for democracy by enhancing both the security and stability of South Korea. Democracy is highly dependent on the ability of the state to protect citizens from both external and internal threats. During the 1950s and 1960s, perhaps the greatest threat to the establishment of a durable democracy in South Korea came from Pyongyang. If North Korea had ever been able to carry out its ambition to reunify the peninsula under Pyongyang’s leadership, it would have made the emergence of democracy anywhere on the Korean Peninsula impossible. Although Park did not eliminate the North Korean threat altogether, he certainly enhanced South Korea’s capacity to defend itself. Economic power and military power are closely interrelated. As the South Korean economy developed, so too did its capacity for autonomous defense.

Park’s government also maintained internal order. It is certainly true that some of the measures taken by Park Chung Hee on this front—intimidating, arresting and torturing his opponents—were far too extreme. At the same time, liberal democracy has never developed in countries where personal property was not protected and basic political stability could not be guaranteed.

Gregg Andrew Brazinsky
Despite the Yusin government’s atrocious record on human rights, Park did help to maintain civil order and the rule of law throughout his tenure in power. South Koreans generally could acquire and be secure in their own personal property and use it as they saw fit. In the long run, these rights gave South Koreans greater incentive to participate in the governance of their own society, even if they could not do so immediately.

Ultimately, the impact of the Park Chung Hee era on South Korea’s later emergence as a democracy was very complicated and multi-faceted. There can be no question that Park went further than he needed to in order to maintain social order and maintain South Korea’s security. Although placing some limits on popular freedoms and participation may have been necessary in an economically impoverished country with no history of democracy like South Korea, the gross violations of human rights and basic civil liberties perpetrated by his regime were not. At the same time, political development in South Korea during the Park Chung Hee years followed a fundamentally ironic problem. Park succeeded magnificently at spurring rapid economic development in South Korea. But his very success helped to foster disillusionment with the dictatorship he had created. As South Koreans gained more economic choices as a result of the country’s rapid development, they became increasingly frustrated with their relative lack of political choices and this led to growing protests against his authority.

The rise of political dissent in South Korea

The imposition of Yusin in 1972 led to growing protests against the government in South Korea. Initially, these protests were mainly carried out by elites such as students, intellectuals, and influential Christian ministers. Over the course of the 1970s, students and Christian churches worked together to mobilize South Korea’s growing class of industrial laborers against the Park regime’s growing authoritarianism. Workers endured harsh conditions in the ROK with labor unions suppressed fiercely by the government. Idealistic students often devoted their time to going into factories and training workers in the techniques of labor activism and social protest. The level of confrontation between the state and this alliance of dissident groups escalated swiftly during the early 1970s. American policy was mostly passive in the face of this potentially explosive situation. The Nixon Administration was focused on improving relations with the People’s Republic of China and limiting America’s overall involvement in Asia. It generally supported Park and hoped that his government would find a way of maintaining stability and feared that publicly criticizing the regime would only make things worse.

Over time, however, events and circumstances made it increasingly difficult for Park to maintain his grip on political power. In 1976, Jimmy Carter was elected president in the United States. The Carter Administration made human rights one of its key foreign policy priorities, and the new president was far more willing to criticize America’s longstanding allies on their human rights records than his predecessors had been. Frictions between the Carter Administration and the Park government grew quickly, but Washington found that its influence over the government was diminishing rapidly. At the same time, Park found that his political position was weaker because he was now receiving growing measures of criticism from Washington, which had mostly looked the other way when it came to his regime’s authoritarianism in the past.

By the late 1970s, dissident forces in South Korea were becoming increasingly determined. Park’s refusal to show any flexibility in the face of this rising tide of dissent would ultimately bring about his downfall. In August 1979, Park’s decision to suppress a strike at the YH Trading Company led to a series of escalating clashes between his government and democratic forces. Striking workers fled to the headquarters of the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP), which
was still represented in the National Assembly, though its actual power was very limited. In response, Park expelled Kim Young Sam (Kim Yong-sam), the party’s leader, from the assembly, a move that in turn caused all remaining members of the NDP to resign their seats. Popular demonstrations, often led by students and workers, began in Pusan and soon spread throughout the country (Oh 1999: 71–72). All of a sudden, the stability of the South Korean government, long assumed to be unassailable, seemed to be in jeopardy.

Key officials in Park’s government did not completely agree on how to handle the situation. Some argued for reform but others, including Park, argued that it was necessary to take a hard line with the protestors and assure the survival of the ROK government. When Park called a meeting of several of his top advisors on 26 October, an argument broke out among them. No detailed archival records about what was discussed and who made what arguments during the meeting exists. Apparently, however, the KCIA director Kim Chae-gyu became increasingly frustrated with Park over the course of the meeting. For reasons that are still not clear, Kim suddenly shot and killed both the South Korean president and his bodyguard Ch’a Ch’i-ch’ŏl (Brazinsky 2007: 232). The Yushin system died along with Park, but one key question still remained unanswered: What political direction would South Korea move in after Park’s death?

Initially, it seemed like South Korea would evolve toward greater democracy. Prime Minister Ch’oe Kyu Ha (Ch’oe Kyu-ha) assumed the presidency after Park’s assassination and announced that the Yushin constitution would be revised and free elections would follow. Ch’oe also moved to restore the civil liberties of dissident politicians such as Kim Dae Jung (Kim Tae-jung), who had been kept under surveillance by the Park regime. But this promising new beginning soon turned into another harrowing ordeal for South Koreans who craved democracy. On 12 December 1979, Major General Chun Doo Hwan (Chŏn Tu-hwan), the leader of a clandestine association within the military placed Chŏng Sŏng-hwa, the army chief of staff, under arrest for allegedly playing a role in the assassination of Park Chung Hee. These trumped up charges were, in reality, little more than an excuse for Chun to take control over the South Korean military. Over the next few months, Chun’s position in South Korean politics slowly grew stronger while President Ch’oe’s became weaker. Under duress, Ch’oe appointed Chun director of the KCIA and promoted him to the rank of lieutenant general (Oh 1999: 72–78). Those desiring greater progress toward democracy in South Korea could read the writing on the wall; they knew that Chun intended to restore military rule.

It was the tragic series of events that occurred in Kwangju during the spring of 1980 that would defer truly democratic governance in South Korea for the next seven years. When Ch’oe announced Chun’s promotion in April, student-led demonstrations exploded throughout South Korea and were accompanied by major industrial strikes. With anti-government protests continuing to grow in size and intensity, Chun declared martial law on 17 May. Military authorities closed major universities, suspended the National Assembly, and arrested major opposition leaders (Oh 1999: 80–81). Protests subsided in most parts of the country as a result of Chun’s show of force but continued unabated in the southwestern city of Kwangju. On 18 May, special warfare forces entered the city and were followed by paratroopers on 21 May. When some of the paratroopers fired on civilians, the protests took on a more violent turn with demonstrators seizing armaments and taking over government buildings. With chaos engulfing Kwangju, General John Wickham, the commander of American forces stationed in Korea, released the ROK Army’s Twentytenth Division from its duties along the Demilitarized Zone. Chun used the Twentytenth Division to suppress the uprising in Kwangju, killing between 200 and 2000 South Korean citizens in the process (Brazinsky 2007: 236–238). The United States, because of Wickham’s decision to release a combat division, has long been perceived by South Koreans as being complicit in these tragic events.
The picture for South Korean democracy looked bleak in 1980. The military had reasserted itself and brutally suppressed dissent. While Park Chung Hee had always enjoyed some measure of respect from many South Koreans despite his authoritarianism, Chun Doo Hwan was never very popular. But Chun did receive staunch support from the incoming Reagan Administration in the United States. He was invited to the White House in 1981, where he was warmly embraced by the new president, Ronald Reagan (Brazinsky 2007: 240–242). With US support and the powerful ROK military behind him, Chun’s position seemed unassailable.

Despite Chun’s efforts to put a stranglehold on the process of democratization in South Korea, however, other factors militated against continuing military rule. There were two key factors that played a particularly important role in unraveling Chun’s grasp on political power: the growing power of minjung ideology and South Korea’s economic liberalization. During the 1980s, these two factors would slowly but surely erode Chun’s grip on power.

Meaning literally “the people,” minjung ideology became a powerful unifying force for South Korean students, workers, intellectuals, theologians, and others who protested against the military rule. The concept of minjung was far more than an ideology of social or political protests. It informed the works of South Korean economists, historians, and artists who, in different ways, sought to represent the oppressed masses of Korean people as historical subjects (Lie 1998: 137–139). Minjung called for the restructuring of South Korean politics and society to favor the masses whose aspirations for democracy, it contended, had been suppressed by the combination of military rule and American hegemony. During the 1980s, pro-democracy activists in South Korea became more hostile to the United States than at any other time in South Korean history. Many demonstrations combined anti-Americanism with demands for reform by the ROK’s military dictatorship. Throughout the period between 1981 and 1987, such anti-government demonstrations became a common sight on the country’s major college campuses. The government frequently responded by sending in riot police armed with tear gas and torturing or imprisoning those responsible for the protests. The government managed to hold onto power through the use of violence, but the growing influence of minjung ideology was clearly making military rule untenable in the long term.

Economic liberalization also contributed significantly to the momentum for democracy in South Korea. Although Chun Doo Hwan wanted South Korea’s rapid economic growth to continue, he did not have a clear economic agenda as Park Chung Hee had. He was strongly influenced by both pressures coming from the Reagan Administration advocating economic change and his advisors, many of who had been trained in the United States and subscribed to the free market ideologies espoused at many American universities. Park Chung Hee had used a system of state-guided capitalism to achieve rapid economic growth while, at the same time, making South Korean business conglomerates (or chaebol) heavily dependent on the state for loans and other kinds of support. During the 1980s, economic liberalization made new sources of capital, including foreign investment, available to South Korean business. The result was that the chaebol became less dependent on the state and more willing to see political reform occur (Woo 1991: 190–201). During the late 1980s, South Korea’s businesses and its growing middle class increasingly threw their weight behind democratization, making it even more difficult for the military to perpetuate its rule.

By the late 1980s, South Korea looked increasingly unstable politically. On the one hand, it continued to be governed by a repressive military regime. On the other hand, anti-government protests were being joined by students, laborers, and the country’s increasingly influential middle class. The country seemed poised for a major political explosion and that is exactly what happened in 1987.
The emergence of democracy

Military dictatorship’s final hour in South Korea came during the spring of 1987. In April of that year, Chun went back on a promise that he had made earlier to allow a free presidential election and in June announced that Roh Tae Woo (No T’ae-u), another army general, would be his successor. The announcement set off a massive wave of anti-government demonstrations involving over one million people. There was no way for Chun to quiet these protests, short of deploying the military and running the risk of an all-out civil war. Although Reagan had been a supporter of Chun, the White House had learned a lesson from Carter’s inept handling of events in Kwangju. This time, Washington made it clear that it did not approve of the use of force by Chun’s government. In the face of strong pressure from both the South Korean public and the United States, Chun finally agreed to step down. On 29 June, Roh Tae Woo announced that free elections would be held in December and that significant constitutional reforms would be made (Brazinsky 2007: 249).

Roh’s announcement was a pivotal moment in South Korea’s transition to a more democratic government, but the transition did not occur instantaneously. Free elections took place as promised in December 1987, but Roh managed to pull off a narrow victory. Roh had taken some of the credit for Chun’s resignation and anti-communism remained a powerful force in South Korean politics. Moreover, the two leading opposition candidates, future presidents Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam, split the opposition vote, enabling Roh to win a small plurality. Nevertheless, the election had been the freest and fairest in Korean history, and members of the democratic opposition would soon have their own chances to serve as president—Kim Young Sam triumphed in the next presidential election held five years later and Kim Dae Jung was elected president in 1997.

During the years since 1987, South Korea has continued to make political progress, refining and improving its democracy in ways that are suited for its own unique national circumstances. During the two and a half decades since then, the ROK has continued to enjoy free and fair elections, with power being transferred back and forth peacefully between competing factions on different ends of the ideological spectrum. The same cannot be said for the vast majority of nations that were once victims of colonial aggression. Since Chun’s ouster, civil society groups have become particularly influential in South Korea. Although military rule had ended, many of the trappings of Korea’s long history of authoritarian rule remained. Civil society groups played an important role in encouraging broad, democratizing reforms in nearly every aspect of South Korean life. Groups such as the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice and the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy aimed to promote democratization from both the top down and the bottom up. On the one hand, they reached out to newly elected officials to advocate for their causes, while at the same time, sponsoring research and engaging in campaigns to keep citizens aware of their responsibilities (Yeo 2013).

Today, South Korean democracy continues to evolve. It is still imperfect. Some observers note that Korean political parties remain immature in that they are partially formed around loyalty to particular leaders rather than abstract principals and ideas. Corruption also continues to mar South Korean politics, although the ROK is often no different from the United States and other Western democracies when it comes to this issue. Nevertheless, South Korea’s halting but persistent transformation into a democracy during the last six decades demands the attention of all who wonder about the fate of freedom in the twenty-first century. In a world where nations continue to struggle to establish stable democratic institutions, South Korea is one of the few examples where such institutions could be created despite a history of domestic conflict and civil war. Though most countries cannot and will not follow the same path to democracy
that South Koreans did, understanding how democracy took hold there can unquestionably contribute to an appreciation of what might be involved in promoting it elsewhere. Ultimately, the fact that South Koreans are still perfecting their democracy by no means detracts from what they have accomplished. It should simply remind us that democracy is not a destination, but a process.

References


