

Gray Skies Ahead

Prospects for Korea's Democracy

In early January, I spoke with my colleague Francis Fukuyama about a range of global issues in an exclusive interview for the *Munhwa Ilbo*, a major Korean newspaper. Looking back on 2022, he said it was “a very good year.”¹ I was rather surprised by this assessment, given ongoing political turmoil at home and abroad.

Elaborating on his answer, Fukuyama explained that “the Russians got completely bogged down” in Ukraine. Moreover, “China experienced mass protests, and there were protests also in Iran.” In the United States, “pro-Trump forces failed to make gains” in the November midterms. Fukuyama concluded that we may “look back on 2022 as the year when this democratic recession that has been going on for over 15 years finally bottomed out.”²

Though I agree that the democratic recession has bottomed out, it is too early to tell whether we will see a recovery. History tells us that we could remain stalled in

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the status quo for a while. Even after Hitler, Stalin, and Mao disappeared from the scene, Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism remained. Juan Perón (Little Hitler), Nicolae

Ceașescu (Little Stalin), and Pol Pot (Little Mao) emerged in different parts of the world. Trumpism could remain a potent political force despite Trump's loss in 2020. Politicians may continue to model themselves after Trump. A democratic recovery will be a long and arduous process, requiring a great deal of attention and effort.

WHITHER KOREA'S DEMOCRACY?

Just as the United States turned the tide on democratic backsliding with Biden's victory, Yoon Suk-Yeol's election halted Korea's democratic decline. The Yoon administration entered office trumpeting liberal democratic values and calling for a politics of common sense and fairness. However, it failed to live up to its rhetoric during its first year. Anti-pluralism pervades Korean politics, and polarization only continues to worsen. The ruling and opposition parties are locked in a vicious cycle of mutual hostility. This begs the question of whether Korea's democracy can set itself on a path to recovery.

I first raised concerns about Korea's democratic decline in an essay in the May 2020 edition of *Sindonga* magazine, entitled “Korean Democracy is Sinking under the Guise of the Rule of Law.”³ The Moon Jae-In administration was in its third year at the time.

In that essay, I noted that the Moon administration, intoxicated by a sense of moral superiority, regarded the opposition as a great evil with which there could be no compromise. It showed no qualms about deploying populist tactics, regarding itself as the champion of the ordinary citizen in a pitched battle against the

1 Kim Namseok, “A Resurgence of Democracy? A Conversation with Francis Fukuyama on the Challenges of a Changing Global Order,” Freeman Spogli Institute, January 12, 2023, <https://cddrl.fsi.stanford.edu/news/resurgence-democracy>.

2 Namseok, “Resurgence of Democracy?”

3 Gi-Wook Shin, “Korean Democracy is Sinking under the Guise of the Rule of Law,” Shorenstein APARC, April 1, 2020. <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/news/korean-democracy-sinking-under-guise-rule-law>.

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establishment elite. Moreover, it politicized the courts and undermined the separation of powers. It was weakening Korea's democracy "under the guise of the rule of law." If political actors recklessly violated democratic norms and ideals, no amount of procedural legitimacy would be enough to sustain Korea's liberal democracy. I warned

liberal democracies.⁶ However, he has failed to move beyond rhetorical gestures. Korea's citizens are still waiting to see what an emphasis on liberal democratic values looks like in practice.

Moreover, the logic of political tribalism continues to overwhelm liberalism. Article 46(2) of Korea's constitution

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that Korea's democracy could gradually erode, just as one could "become soaked by a drizzle without noticing."⁴ The essay was an earnest plea to prevent an unsettling tragedy—that a generation of politicians could dismantle the democracy that they had passionately fought for as pro-democracy activists in their youth.

This diagnosis formed the basis for *South Korea's Democracy in Crisis* (2022), which I co-edited with Ho-Ki Kim, a professor of sociology at Yonsei University.⁵ This edited volume includes essays by progressive and conservative academics from Korea and the United States. It explains how and why Korea's hard-won democracy entered a state of crisis, and it points to illiberalism, populism, and polarization as the main reasons. As we approach the first anniversary of President Yoon's inauguration and look toward the future, it is timely to reassess the current state of Korea's democracy along those three dimensions.

Let us begin with illiberalism. The Moon administration, which wielded a Manichean logic of good and evil and stoked chauvinistic anti-Japanese nationalism, is no longer in power. As if in reaction to these trends, President Yoon repeatedly stressed the importance of freedom. In his inaugural address, he put forth a vision of value-based diplomacy centered on solidarity between

declares that "members of the National Assembly . . . shall perform their duties in accordance with conscience."⁷ However, many members are afraid to speak their minds for fear of angering their own side. Government officials are still indicted for "abuse of authority" over decisions they made while implementing policy measures. The core democratic norm of forbearance remains a distant prospect. There are serious concerns that wide-ranging prosecutorial investigations against Moon administration officials are descending into yet another campaign to "eradicate deep-rooted evils," which was one of the Moon administration's political priorities.⁸

Next is populism. In its 21st-century form, populism does not simply appeal to popular sentiment. It has two defining characteristics: anti-elitism and anti-pluralism. The former takes aim at the elite establishment, while the latter rejects coexistence with different groups. Anti-elitism manifests itself as hostility toward party politics, and anti-pluralism provokes a hatred of opposing political forces. Furthermore, technological advances and the dissemination of social media platforms enable populist leaders to communicate directly with their supporters. This form of direct interaction is another key characteristic of contemporary populism. In Korea, there are

4 Shin, "Korean Democracy is Sinking."

5 For more details about the book, see "South Korea's Democracy in Crisis," Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, <https://aparc.fsi.stanford.edu/publication/south-korea%E2%80%99s-democracy-crisis>.

6 "Inaugural Address by President Yoon Suk Yeol," Korea.net, May 10, 2022, <https://www.korea.net/Government/Briefing-Room/Presidential-Speeches/view?articleId=215076&categoryId=111&language=A020101&pageIndex=2>.

7 Ministry of Government Legislation, "Constitution of the Republic of Korea," <https://www.law.go.kr/LSW/lsInfoP.do?lsiSeq=61603&viewCls=engLsInfoR&urlMode=engLsInfoR#0000>.

8 Shin, "Korean Democracy is Sinking."

populist forces on both the left (*Moon-ppa, gae-ddal*) and the right (*Taegukgi* brigade).⁹

Ideological attacks against the elite have subsided since Yoon entered office. However, the administration's policy against the so-called "new" establishment, including labor unions, runs the risk of veering toward populism. It is necessary to address corruption in labor unions and correct imprudent practices, such as the emergence of a "labor aristocracy." While doing so, the Yoon administration should refrain from taking a politically motivated approach that appeals to conservative voters.

Populist leadership is also a problem. In the weeks leading up to the People Power Party's (PPP) national convention in March, where the ruling party elected its new leader, President Yoon and his office showed a heavy-handed approach by openly throwing their weight behind Kim Gi-Hyeon. On the other side of the aisle, Lee Jae-Myung, the leader of the opposition Democratic Party of Korea (DPK), is currently the subject of ongoing prosecutorial investigations. Lee's response to these investigations has not been befitting of a political leader in a pluralist democracy. Both Yoon and Lee hew closer to a "strongman" style of leadership that values boldness and

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the ability to achieve results, even at the cost of democratic norms such as compromise and mutual understanding through communication. Though they represent opposing political parties, Yoon and Lee share a similar political style that, in turn, reinforces mutual hostility between the two sides.

Last is political polarization. After the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye and the election of Moon Jae-In, political polarization in Korea has further deteriorated due to the economic repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic and widening socioeconomic inequalities. Even outside the political sphere, there is growing mutual distrust between individuals and between communities. There is no space for moderation or nuance. Instead of

agreeing to disagree, as would be the norm in a pluralist society, everyone is compelled to choose a side. As political fandoms come to the fore and politicians amplify gender issues to "divide and conquer" the electorate, Korean politics has degenerated into a raw struggle for power between warring tribes. It no longer fulfills its most basic function—to gather a wide range of differing opinions and to seek compromise.

Mutual toleration, coexistence, and compromise are becoming increasingly rare in Korean politics, which is defined by a winner-take-all electoral system and a powerful presidency. The extremely narrow margin of victory for Yoon Suk-Yeol over Lee Jae-Myung—a mere 0.73 percentage points—is a sobering portrait of just how polarized Korea has become. Since the DPK still holds a legislative majority in the National Assembly, cooperation across the aisle is a lost cause. The Yoon administration and the PPP are pressuring the opposition with prosecutorial investigations. In response, the DPK has called for the appointment of a special, independent prosecutor to investigate allegations surrounding not only Lee, but also Yoon and First Lady Kim Keon-Hee. The DPK appears to be opposing only for the sake of opposing.

The National Assembly has abdicated its most basic responsibility of passing laws to improve the lives of Korea's citizens. According to the National Assembly's Secretariat, 13,198 pieces of legislation were pending review across 17 standing committees at the end of 2022. This is an average of approximately 776 per committee. This figure is significantly higher than 8,957 (527 per committee) in 2021, and only 4,023 (237 per committee) at the end of 2020. Political polarization has worsened since the transfer of power to the PPP last year. Unfortunately, the future of Korea's democracy is anything but bright.

Based on the three metrics of illiberalism, populism, and polarization, Korea's democracy is unlikely to return to a path of recovery for the foreseeable future. The transfer of power to the conservatives may have prevented a further decline, but Korea's democracy is stuck in a quagmire with no exit in sight. There is also a growing mistrust in politics among the Korean people.

In my column in the May 2022 edition of *Sindonga*, I reviewed the five years of the Moon administration and outlined my hopes and expectations for the incoming Yoon administration. I noted that Korea's democracy had been "drenched in a heavy downpour over the course of this year's presidential election." I was one of many who resolved to "keep a close eye to see whether Yoon Suk-Yeol will be able to save South Korea's democracy

9 For a more detailed discussion of these political groups, see Gi-Wook Shin, "In Troubled Waters: South Korea's Democracy in Crisis," Shorenstein APARC, May 3, 2022, <https://fsi.stanford.edu/news/troubled-waters-south-korea%E2%80%99s-democracy-crisis>.

from the impending thunderstorm.”¹⁰ As the Yoon administration approaches the end of its first year, it is time for a clear-headed assessment of where Korea’s democracy stands. The downpour has stopped, but the skies are still overcast. There is no telling when we might see sunshine again.

THE END OF STRONGMEN—OR NOT

I have argued that Korea’s democratic decline must be understood as part of a global phenomenon. Democratic backsliding remains a topic of great concern among Western intellectuals. According to Freedom House, the proportion of democracies in the world surpassed 50% in the mid-1990s as a result of the “third wave” of democratization that began in the 1970s. After reaching a peak of 62% in 2006, this figure has declined for 15 consecutive years. It has now fallen below 50%. This trend is reminiscent of the 1930s and 40s. Back then, the United States and the United Kingdom defended democracy from fascism and communism in World War II and the Cold War. During the past decade, however, even these two countries have experienced a crisis of democracy.

As noted above in Fukuyama’s assessment, there are signs that the global decline in democracy has indeed bottomed out. Putin is mired in a crisis, and Xi is also facing an uphill battle. Because the two leading authoritarian powers are facing difficulties, the political landscape has become more favorable for democracies. At the outset of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, many anticipated that Putin would win an easy victory. However, the war has become a global proxy war between democracies and authoritarian powers. Russia’s military is floundering, and some analysts even argue that this war could lead to Putin’s downfall. Xi has consolidated power to secure a third term as president, but public discontent is building over COVID-19 policies and economic stagnation. Researchers at Cambridge University have reported that, in general, the power of authoritarian leaders has weakened over the course of the pandemic.

Most of the political leaders highlighted in Gideon Rachman’s *The Age of the Strongman*—Donald Trump, Boris Johnson, Rodrigo Duterte, and Jair Bolsonaro—have exited center stage in their respective countries. Erdoğan’s leadership in Turkey has also taken a hit due to the recent earthquake. In his book, Rachman warns

that the emergence of strongmen since the 2000s posed a threat to democracy across the world. It is thus an encouraging sign that their political influence appears to be largely waning. One of the reasons why pro-Trump forces failed to gain ground in last November’s midterms is that American voters chose to defend and restore democracy.¹¹

Even so, it is unclear whether we are in the midst of a “fourth wave” of democratization. Illiberalism and populism continue to cast a shadow in many parts of the world. The underlying socioeconomic conditions that gave rise to illiberalism and populism have not improved, with inflation and income inequality creating serious difficulties. Moreover, political polarization shows no sign of improving. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit’s democracy index, the global average barely changed from 2021 (5.28) to 2022 (5.29).¹² In the United States, while Trump’s political clout has shrunk, he is still a major contender for the 2024 presidential race. Trumpism is alive and well. Many pro-Trump politicians who claim that the 2020 election was stolen have been elected to Congress.

Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt observe in *How Democracies Die* that democratic decline in the 21st century has often occurred as a result of elected leaders gradually dismantling democratic institutions. Military dictators or communist revolutionaries forcibly toppled democracies in the past, but democracies are now under attack from politicians who entered office through free and fair elections. Since the democratic recession is a global phenomenon, a democratic recovery will also require international cooperation.

HOW KOREA’S DEMOCRACY CAN RECOVER

Korea is not immune to global trends. While these trends will determine the prevailing winds, there are steps that Korea can take on its own. To set itself on the path to a robust recovery, Korea’s democracy must undergo major surgery in multiple areas. It is necessary to reform institutions and establish a different political culture. There must be a new style of political leadership, and there must be a concerted effort to address underlying socioeconomic conditions.

Institutional reform can wait no longer. There is broad agreement that the institutions created by the 1987 constitution, referred to as the “1987 regime,” have

10 Shin, “In Troubled Waters: South Korea’s Democracy in Crisis.”

11 For example, see Josh Boak and Hannah Fingerhut, “VoteCast: Inflation Top Concern, but Democracy a Worry Too,” Associated Press, November 8, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/2022-midterm-elections-abortion-biden-inflation-cf4dffe87a7c2fd1bdd58df0346e15dc>, and Zack Beauchamp, “The Midterms Showed American Democracy Won’t Go Down Without a Fight,” Vox, November 9, 2022, <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/23449021/2022-midterms-results-election-deniers-democracy>.

12 Economist Intelligence Unit, “Democracy Index 2022,” accessed April 17, 2023, <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>.

outlived their historical purpose. Political calculations, however, continue to stymie efforts to overhaul these institutions. The 1987 constitution created an extremely powerful presidency with a one-term limit, giving rise to a host of negative repercussions. All but 47 of the 300 seats in the National Assembly are filled through winner-take-all elections in single-member districts. Constitutional reform is required to address the former, and electoral reform is needed to fix the latter.¹³ Anonymous voting should be eliminated to protect the autonomy of each legislator, while also holding them accountable for their decisions. Although the details must be negotiated between the ruling and opposition parties, the overall objective should be to facilitate compromise and alleviate political polarization.

Korea's political culture also needs to change. Politicians must learn to tolerate different opinions, and political parties should openly communicate with one another to find solutions. Demonizing the other side is unacceptable. It is only natural for there to be a wide variety of opinions in a pluralistic, democratic society. Those

Moreover, it is impossible to reduce political polarization without addressing the underlying socioeconomic factors. It is vital to work toward an economic recovery and to rebuild a robust middle class. The pandemic, Sino-U.S. tensions, and Russia's invasion of Ukraine have brought about inflation and economic turmoil. This has worsened economic inequality, thereby fueling the fire of political polarization. Political reforms alone will not solve the problem. In this vein, the Yoon administration should address labor unions from the perspective of labor policy, not as an ideological issue.

Above all, it is necessary to establish a style of political leadership befitting of a liberal democracy. Authoritarian leadership is built on charisma, patriarchal authority, a strict vertical hierarchy, unity of purpose, and efficiency. In contrast, leadership in a liberal democracy consists of open communication, horizontal relationships, respect for diversity, and forbearance. Korea's democracy will move one step forward when it moves beyond strongmen to embrace a style of leadership that shows respect for democratic norms and values.

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who hold different views should be able to respectfully engage in dialogue with one another, as long as these views align with the fundamental values outlined in Korea's constitution. Divisive identity politics and insular political fandoms have no place in a healthy democracy.

Political parties must also change their internal culture. During the recent race to elect its new leader, the PPP was overtaken by a controversy about who truly qualified as a "pro-Yoon" politician. This show of allegiance is more reminiscent of an authoritarian regime than a democracy. There are also problems on the other side of the aisle. In late February, the National Assembly narrowly rejected a motion to allow the arrest of Lee Jae-Myung over corruption charges.¹⁴ Because the votes were cast anonymously, some DPK supporters vowed to hunt down "traitors" who did not vote against the motion. Once again, such actions have no place in a healthy democracy.

Joseph Nye was an early advocate of the importance of soft power in international politics. "Soft power" refers to the ability to persuade through attraction instead of force or coercion. In *The Powers to Lead*, Nye argues that successful leaders require two "hard power" skills and three soft power skills. The former refers to managerial skills and political acumen, while the latter includes communication, vision, and emotional intelligence.

By this standard, President Yoon took positive steps in terms of his leadership style upon entering office. He put forth a clear and timely vision that stressed fairness, common sense, and the restoration of liberal democratic values. By moving the presidential office to Yongsan and directly engaging with reporters every morning, he showed a desire to improve communication and respond to public sentiment. Mistakes were made, but he was initially headed in the right direction. Credit should be given where it is due.

13 One proposed solution is to create multi-member districts. It will also be necessary to prohibit "satellite" parties that defeat the purpose of the mixed-member proportional system that was created during the Moon administration. For a more detailed discussion, see Shin, "Korean Democracy is Sinking."

14 Sitting National Assembly members cannot be arrested without a consenting vote of the National Assembly.

FREEDOM, FAIRNESS, AND COMMON SENSE

Since then, however, Yoon appears to have returned to a strongman style of leadership. There are fewer efforts to communicate with the opposition and empathize with public sentiment. Instead of relying on political acumen, his administration is wielding the law as a political tool. It bears repeating that the rule of law is not sufficient to guarantee a liberal democracy. We witnessed all too clearly how the Moon administration eroded Korea's democracy while ostensibly appealing to the rule of law. A liberal democracy ultimately rests on respect for democratic norms and values. It cannot be sustained without a vigilant effort to safeguard these norms and values. To protect freedom, which President Yoon repeatedly mentioned in his inaugural address, it is crucial to tolerate the other side and demonstrate forbearance. Prosecutorial authority must be exercised with great caution, and his administration must show patience in persuading the opposition and the people.

The failures of the Moon administration stemmed from its heavy reliance on a tight-knit network of former pro-democracy activists. It did not keep its eyes and ears open to public sentiment. There were no checks and balances to detect and correct mistakes. Similarly, there are now serious concerns that the Yoon administration could follow the same path by exclusively relying on a super-network of prosecutors. Consider, for example, the failure to appropriately vet Chung Sun-Sin, a former prosecutor, before he was appointed as the head of the National Office of Investigation in February. Chung, who previously worked under Yoon at the Prosecutor's Office, resigned after reports emerged that his son had bullied a high school roommate. When he resigned from his role as prosecutor general to enter politics, Yoon vowed to restore fairness and common sense in the face of injustice. He should remain true to that vow. The Korean people elected him to the highest office in the land, and he has a responsibility to uphold democratic norms and values.

International cooperation is also vital on the path to a global democratic recovery. Recall how the free world, led by the United States and the United Kingdom, joined forces in the struggle against Nazism and communism. Recognizing the importance of multilateral cooperation, the Biden administration has organized the Summit for Democracy. The second summit, held in late March, was co-hosted in Korea, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, the United States, and Zambia. In effect, Korea represented Asia. At this summit, it was announced that Korea would host the third summit.¹⁵ These events are opportunities

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for the Yoon administration to present a detailed strategy for how Korea can play a leading role in the resurgence of democracy across the world.

One possibility would be to create and support an international forum to discuss relevant issues. In the United States, the National Endowment for Democracy, funded primarily by Congress, supports a wide range of activities across the world to promote democracy. Shorenstein APARC is currently in discussions with the Korea Foundation for Advanced Studies to host an annual dialogue, called the "Sustainable Democracy Roundtable," for Korean and American experts and practitioners to explore the topic of democratic recovery. This dialogue will also involve young scholars and students, with the aim of nurturing future democratic leaders. Through convening similar international forums, Korea could play a leading role in promoting international solidarity among liberal democracies by fostering connections between private citizens as well as governments.

NEXT KOREA: BEYOND A ZERO-SUM SOCIETY

As I thought about how to conclude this series of essays, I was reminded of *The Zero-Sum Society* (1980) by Lester Thurow, which I read during my time in graduate school. In a zero-sum society, one person's gain is another's loss. The overall sum of gains and losses adds up to zero. Thurow used this concept to explain why it was difficult for American society to address environmental and energy issues in the 1970s as it faced economic stagnation. The clashing interests of different groups in society impeded problem-solving.

The most serious problem of a zero-sum society is that any kind of reform or change will meet heavy resistance. Close-knit interest groups will fiercely protect their own interests. This helps explain why social conflict is intensifying in Korea today, and why it is so difficult to bring about change. Political leadership is needed to transform a zero-sum society into a positive-sum society, in which the sum of gains and losses is greater than zero.

15 "South Korea to Host Third 'Summit for Democracy' – Joint Statement," Reuters, March 29, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/south-korea-host-third-summit-democracy-joint-statement-2023-03-29/>.

Consider the two predominant forces in Korean politics: those who achieved economic development through industrialization, and those who fought for democratization. These two groups must cease their zero-sum struggle. They must resist the temptation to demonize each other as “descendants of dictators” or a “pro-North Korean fifth column” respectively. It is time to honestly reflect upon each side’s successes and shortcomings, so that they can work together toward a positive-sum future for Korea. There is no time to lose. Inter-Korean relations are in dire straits, and Sino-U.S. tensions are intensifying by the day. Korea’s aging society presents formidable obstacles to economic growth. As the late Professor Park Se-II of Seoul National University argued, Korea must move beyond industrialization and democratization to become a global leader.

Over the past year, I explored “Next Korea”—Korea’s vision for the future—and sought to outline a roadmap for how it might be achieved. This series of essays, which addressed politics, economics, society, culture, and foreign policy, was intended to convey my thoughts and reflections on how Korea could advance to the next stage of its development. I felt that having an outside

perspective allowed me to see the “forest” of Korea’s path toward the future, even if I cannot see the trees in great detail.

By any measure, Korea has made remarkable achievements in a short period of time. It has overcome war, division, and authoritarian rule to become a country with the 10th largest economy in the world in only seven decades. Its soft power is sweeping across the globe, and Korea has world-class talent in every field. This is truly a miracle, and Koreans have every reason to be proud. The challenge now is to take the next step. Korea stands at a critical crossroads. Will it settle for the status quo, or could it leap into the top five?

Steve Jobs closed his famous 2005 commencement address at Stanford with two words: “Stay hungry.” This was at once a call to action for the ambitious Stanford graduates in the audience and a reminder to himself to keep moving forward. Korea must also “stay hungry” if it is to move higher and leap toward the future. I will be watching with great hope and anticipation to see how Korea will flourish in the years to come.

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