

The Future of Korean Democracy

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Korea faces the same democratic deficits as other countries—polarized opinion, rising populism, pervasive fake news—just when it needs responsive democracy the most.

The German government recently arrested 25 members of a conspiratorial right-wing group plotting to overthrow the government. One of those arrested was a member of a defunct German royal family that the group hoped to install as Germany's new leader.

In the United States, the Republican Party did well enough in the mid-term elections to take over one chamber of Congress. The Party is still dominated by supporters of Donald Trump who believe that the 2020 presidential election was "stolen" as well as many of the congressional races that Republicans lost in 2022.

A failed coup has landed Peruvian President Pedro Castillo in jail, and the country is now convulsed with protests by his supporters who continue to believe that he is a voice of the poor and powerless.

These are just three recent examples of the challenges that democracy faces around the world. Freedom House's [Freedom in the World report](#) released last February, ominously titled "The Global Expansion of Authoritarian Rule," concluded that the state of democracy hasn't been this bad in 25 years:

The present threat to democracy is the product of 16 consecutive years of decline in global freedom. A total of 60 countries suffered declines over the past year, while only 25 improved. As of today, some 38 percent of the global population live in Not Free countries, the highest proportion since 1997.

The Freedom House report came out just before Russia invaded Ukraine, which is perhaps the most frightening example of this trend away from democracy. In what was once the Soviet Union, an authoritarian state (Russia) aligned with other authoritarian countries (Belarus, North Korea) is waging war on a democratic state (Ukraine) allied with other democratic countries (Europe, the United States). There is no starker picture of the challenges that democracy faces in the world today.

South Korea is a democratic country with a vibrant civil society. Its score in the Freedom House report in 2022 is the same as it was the previous year, namely 83 (out of 100). In fact, that number has barely changed over the last five years, so there has been no backsliding according to Freedom House.

To be sure, a lot of countries score better on this democracy index than Korea, some of them perhaps surprising: Uruguay (97), Japan (96), Cyprus (93), Palau (92), Belize (87), and Mongolia (84). The problems that have lowered Korea's score have been around for years: corruption, lack of respect for minority rights, "national security" restrictions related to views deemed to be "pro-North Korean."

The scandals that enveloped Park Geun-Hye and her administration underscored several of these

democratic defects. But her impeachment in 2017 also proved that South Korean democracy could correct itself. And, according to one poll, South Korean satisfaction with democracy actually [increased](#) from 2019 to 2021.

So, why have some analysts begun talking about “[democratic decay](#)” in South Korea? According to a [recent Pew survey](#) of 19 countries, South Koreans topped the poll in terms of public concerns over strong partisan conflict within society. This is perhaps not so surprising given how close and vitriolic the 2022 presidential election was, with Yoon Suk-yeol winning by less than one percent of the vote. In his inaugural address, Yoon [spoke](#) of a democratic “crisis” in the country, which he connected to the rise of anti-intellectual and anti-rational forces.

At one level, this democratic unease in South Korea mirrors the global trend. Globalization has increased economic inequality within countries - for instance, South Korea now has the [second highest income gap](#) among industrialized countries - and voters are increasingly unhappy with the political parties that have presided over this economic transformation. Not surprisingly, economic polarization has produced political polarization.

Technology has given new means of expressing this dissatisfaction through social media platforms that challenge narratives coming from mainstream media. Conspiracy theories have become omnipresent. Around Park’s impeachment in 2017, for instance, [a flurry of fake news](#) generated by Park supporters—tying the scandals to North Korea, announcing that Donald Trump or other politicians backed Park—flooded social media. Conspiracy theories still circulate about the [Gwangju uprising](#), while more recent fake news [involve](#) COVID and even QAnon.

The global decline of center-left and center-right parties has been accompanied by a surge in far-right candidates as well as populists like Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines and Nayib Bukele in El Salvador who claim to be independent. In this environment, it has become increasingly difficult to broker consensus across the political spectrum in favor of economic policy, foreign policy, or any other matter.

But the democratic crisis in Korea is also a reflection of some unique factors. Political parties in Korea are generally built around particular candidates and don’t represent the kind of ideological platform generated by a Social Democratic or Christian Democratic party. In Korea’s contentious political environment, different “[tribes](#)” have emerged that resemble the fan base of sports teams—Nosamo versus Parksamo, *gae-ddal* versus *yideanam*—which does not encourage much in the way of political compromise or independent thinking. Pre-existing social divisions—around gender or age—reinforce these “tribal” affiliations.

Korea doesn’t face the same kind of democratic crisis that has convulsed Peru or the United States. There hasn’t been a risk of a military coup for several decades. A dangerous populist leader like Donald Trump has yet to become popular in Korea.

Still, Korea’s democratic crisis is worrisome. The country needs a consensus policy on North Korea that can gain broad support in the way that Ostpolitik was embraced by the center left and center right in Germany in the 1970s. South Korea needs to implement a climate policy to shift to a fossil-fuel-free future (preferably along with North Korea). It needs an economic policy that can address rampant inequality.

Given these urgent tasks, South Korea needs a well-functioning democracy like never before. The challenge is that Koreans disagree vehemently about how to achieve it. That, of course, is the double edge of democracy. It gives people the voice to choose leaders, but it also gives them the voice to air grievances. The trick of it is to find political leadership and broadly popular policies that can

generate liberty and justice for all—and not just part of the population.

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