

44. See Linda S. Lewis, *Laying Claim to the Memory of May: A Look Back at the 1980 Kwangju Uprising* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2002), for a more complete discussion of the impact of the transition to democracy on the 5-18 movement in Kwangju and the marginalization of radical student groups in the anniversary commemoration events in the late 1990s.

45. See Abelmann, "Reorganizing," 251.

46. Abelmann, "Reorganizing," 253.

47. As first coined in a brochure published by the citizens group Kwangju Citizens Solidarity in 1995. On the eighteenth anniversary of the uprising, in May 1998, Kwangju was a venue for the declaration of the newly drafted Asian Human Rights Charter (see Kwangju Citizens Solidarity, "Program: Declaring the Asian Human Rights Charter," available at [www.ik.co.kr/kcs](http://www.ik.co.kr/kcs)), and the anniversary slogan that year was "Human Rights and Peace, Toward a Harmonious Future."

48. Ju-na Byun and Won-soon Park, eds., *Ch'iyu toejì anün owöl: Isip nyön hu Kwangju hangjaeng p'ihajja silsang mit taech'aek* (Seoul: Dahae, 2000). Published in English (with fewer chapters) as Ju-na Byun and Linda S. Lewis, eds., *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising after Twenty Years: The Unhealed Wounds of the Victims* (Seoul: Dahae, 2000).

49. Byun in Byun and Lewis, *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 37.

50. Byun and Lewis, *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 37.

51. Byun and Lewis, *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 28.

52. Byun and Lewis, *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 22.

53. Won-soon Park, "International Law," 253.

54. Won-soon Park, "International Law," 253.

55. Won-soon Park, "International Law," 252-53.

56. Byun, conclusion to Byun and Lewis, *The 1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 303.

57. Byun, conclusion, 300.

58. Byun, conclusion, 300.

59. Byun, introduction, 30-31.

60. "Oilp'al kinyöm inkwön pyöngwön köllibül wihan kukche haksul taehoe mit ch'ulp'an kinyömhoe."

61. The prospectus for the 5-18 Memorial Health and Human Rights Center envisions a facility with three parts: a hospital, a research center, and a welfare center. The medical clinic will be a "general hospital system where the political violence victims and their families receive inclusive medical and rehabilitation treatment." The research center will investigate and document human rights abuses, while the welfare center will function as a "shelter for human rights victims and their family members and as a general welfare and rehabilitation services center." From unpublished prospectus, summer 2000, 4.

62. "The Government's Responsibility and Role in the Victims' Rehabilitation," in Byun and Lewis, *1980 Kwangju Uprising*, 275.

63. Those who are classified up to the fourth degree (80 percent) disabled; "Government's Responsibility," 32.

## 6

## The Kwangju Uprising as a Vehicle of Democratization: A Comparative Perspective

Jung-kwan Cho

STUDIES OF DEMOCRATIZATION ACROSS COUNTRIES often reveal critical incidents of mass uprising and/or massacre that decidedly affect the course of events. The Kwangju uprising was one such incident, facilitating Korea's democratization in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>1</sup> Although the uprising lasted only ten days, its impact on Korean politics lasted more than fifteen years, changing the ideology and features of the antigovernment movement, restructuring the relationship between the authoritarian regime and the democratization movement, functioning as a symbol of the struggle for democracy, and conditioning other major political processes.

Drawing on theoretical achievements from comparative democratization studies, this chapter explores how the Kwangju uprising influenced the protracted process of political democratization in Korea. The analysis is divided into four sections. The first section discusses the way in which the legitimacy deficit created by the Kwangju massacre damaged the authoritarian regime and induced the regime to the path of democratization.<sup>2</sup> The second section deals with how the legacy of the Kwangju uprising empowered the opposition in the 1980s to challenge authoritarianism, with a focus on cultural framing. The third section, which utilizes the elite survey data I collected in 1996, analyzes the influence of the Kwangju uprising in deterring military involvement at a critical juncture in June 1987. The fourth section shows why and how the legacy of the Kwangju uprising facilitated the democratic consolidation of Korea.

### The Weakening of Authoritarian Legitimacy

What makes a country that once had political equilibrium under an authoritarian regime<sup>3</sup> move toward the "uncertain" world of democracy? A common thread among a vast literature of studies on democratization is the change of relative power between regime and opposition. Among the various factors that contribute to a change in the relative balance of power<sup>4</sup> is an occurrence (or occurrences) of an explosive collective action and/or a subsequent brutal repression or massacre. Such an incident weakens the authoritarian regime, most of all, by undermining its legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as a belief that "in spite of shortcomings and failures, the existing political institutions are better than any others that might be established, and that they therefore can demand obedience."<sup>5</sup> All political regimes, democratic or authoritarian, are more or less dependent on their legitimacy.<sup>6</sup> No political regime in the world is able to sustain itself only through repression and coercion. If the grounds for legitimacy are weak, a regime cannot last long.

Like most contemporary bureaucratic authoritarian governments, the Chun Doo Hwan regime in Korea based its legitimacy primarily on the need for safeguarding national security and stability. However, unlike its immediate predecessor, the Chun regime was not able to base its legitimacy on that premise alone. Both the demise of the preceding government by an assassination of its leader, and the popular yearning for democracy clearly expressed from March to May 1980, convinced the new military leaders that a mere repetition of the Yusin system would not work. The Kwangju uprising in particular demonstrated the people's potential for the highest form of revolt against an unjust state power, while the unprecedented massacre reflected the illegitimacy of the new military in power. No other Korean rule in the past was born with such a high legitimacy deficit.

However, a legitimacy deficit incurred by a massacre does not necessarily lead in the long run to the serious weakening of a regime. For instance, after a series of massacres that killed thousands of demonstrators in 1988–1990, the Burmese military junta, State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), still maintains a firm grip over the country. More than a decade after the Tiananmen Square massacre of 1989, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) also remains strong. How did the Kwangju uprising differ from these other massacres? The main clue lies in the difference in the nature of the political regime.

As apparent from table 6.1, the Chun regime began with a much lower degree of legitimacy than the CCP regime, which, being founded on revolution, gained a powerful source of enduring legitimacy.<sup>7</sup> The blame for the Tiananmen massacre could be diffused to the military or to individual CCP leaders

TABLE 6.1  
Comparison of Political Regimes

Characteristics	The Chun Regime in Korea	The CCP Regime in the PRC
1. Method of establishment	By a military coup	By social revolution and a civil war
2. Organizational base of leadership	Nonhierarchical military	Communist Party (military subject to the party)
3. Ideology (facade)	Liberal democracy	Communism
4. Level of pluralism allowed	High	Low
5. Level of institutionalization	Low	High
6. External dependence	High	Low

such as Li Peng, but in Korea criticism was directed to the center of the regime. The Chun regime itself became identified as a "butcher." Only a part of the military, rather than the military as a whole as in Chile, Uruguay, and Brazil, formed the political regime in Korea. As a result, some in the military who claimed no involvement in the massacre could challenge those former generals in power.<sup>8</sup> The National Polytechnic massacre in November 1973, which led to the decline, and ultimate demise, of a nonhierarchical military regime in Greece provides a good reference.<sup>9</sup>

The Chun regime, whose legitimacy was based on the promise (however nominal it may have been) of defending liberal democracy against the communist threat, could not help but allow a relatively high level of political pluralism and individual freedom. Over time, this condition allowed the discourse on the Kwangju uprising to spread and deepen across the nation, and it facilitated the strengthening of the opposition, which we will examine in detail in the next section. In the PRC, where communist doctrines were officially maintained, political pluralism and individual freedom were very limited; room for diffusion of the Tiananmen discourse was small.

When the massacres took place, the Chun regime was in its initial phase of formation, while the CCP regime was already highly institutionalized. As a result, the Chun regime was in a much weaker position to defend regime legitimacy. True, China in 1989 was undergoing rapid change in terms of policy orientation and social configuration that picked up speed after the mid-1970s. However, the CCP regime's institutional control over society was relatively strong and cohesive, while China's civil society was immature.<sup>10</sup>

Given the high level of international exposure of the massacres in both Kwangju and Beijing, the extent of regime dependence on external power is another key factor in the degree to which a regime may be pressured to defend its legitimacy after being wounded by the incidents. The PRC as a great power is independent in terms of political-military relations with foreign countries.

Economic sanctions on human rights issues have been viewed as impractical, given China's size, because sanctions are more likely to hurt the sanctioner than the sanctionee. On the other hand, maintaining smooth foreign relations with Western countries, especially the United States and Japan, is in the vital interest of any South Korean regime in terms of national security as well as the economy and even the growth of domestic approval for the new regime. Furthermore, both Washington and Tokyo, which share strategic interests with Korea, have leverage to influence policy in Seoul.<sup>11</sup> While condemning the atrocities in Kwangju, foreign governments at first were reluctant to recognize, and even considered sanctioning, the new military junta.

Therefore, unlike the regime in Beijing after June 1989, which turned to coercive measures, the new military regime in Seoul after May 1980 had to make a gesture to compensate for its wounded legitimacy. In order to legitimate itself, the CCP regime did not have to promise democratization. Legitimation through economic nationalism and political conservatism appears to have been sufficient to maintain political stability.<sup>12</sup> In contrast, the emerging Korean military regime had to pledge democratic reform in the years to follow. It did not, however, advocate establishing a permanent form of limited democracy, such as "a Korean style of democracy," which its predecessor pushed. Instead, the Chun regime attempted to establish legitimacy by proclaiming itself a "transitory" regime toward full democracy. Institutionally, for the first time in Korean history, the new constitution of 1980 incorporated a single, nonrenewable tenure for the president, making it certain that a governmental transfer would take place at the end of Chun's term in seven years.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, the presidential election system, which had almost guaranteed the incumbent president's victory under the preceding Yusin constitution, was revised to introduce more competitive elements by enlarging the size of the electoral college<sup>14</sup> and by allowing party identification of electoral college candidates. Provided that elections were held in a reasonably free atmosphere, the rules would limit the advantages of the ruling party.

Throughout the political process in 1981–1988, this claim for a "transitory" regime greatly constrained the range of political options for Chun. First, it paved the way for the regime's liberalization. An authoritarian regime that identifies itself as temporal or transitory loses the grounds for its own existence, once the exigent circumstances (such as guerrilla warfare and economic crisis) that invited it are overcome. In Korea, when the national economy in 1983 showed clear signs of recovering from the crisis situation of 1979–1980, Chun's claim for an authoritarian system as a vehicle of economic recovery was expected to weaken soon. At the same time, economic success enabled the power holders to be more confident in taking risks in managing the regime. Feeling confident in power,<sup>15</sup> Chun relaxed political repression in December

1983. Contrary to his expectations, however, this political opening drove his regime into a more difficult situation. Civil society as well as political opposition was promptly resurrected and grew into a formidable alliance that soundly defeated the ruling party in the general election of 1985.

Second, the "transitory" nature of his regime with a clear time limit constrained Chun in his preparations to select his successor. When a personalistic dictator of an authoritarian regime is bound to leave the office according to a set timetable, succession increasingly becomes a contentious issue. Without a properly legitimated institutional mechanism for succession, such a situation is likely to bring about a lame-duck president, a division among elites within the regime, or a chaotic situation. Obviously Chun did not favor any of these scenarios and was eager to devise a succession mechanism under his command that would ensure a safe succession and preserve his influence over the successor after he left office. Toward this goal Chun tried to amend the constitution toward a parliamentary system in early 1986. But his scheme provoked strong resistance from the democratic forces that rallied around the call for a democratic constitution which would allow a direct presidential election.

### Empowering the Opposition

While the role of the democratic movement in Korea's transition to democracy in 1987 is widely recognized, attention has rarely been given to the question of how a relatively recent movement could effectively wage a protracted struggle against a strong, cohesive authoritarian regime. This section examines how the legacy of the Kwangju uprising helped strengthen the infant mass movement, with a focus on "cultural framing," which comparative studies suggest is one of the three most important factors that determine the power of a social movement.<sup>16</sup>

Despite wielding strong influence at key junctures of Korean political development, the organized mass opposition movement, outside university campuses, did not have a long history. In the 1970s, it had consisted mostly of intellectuals, professionals, religious leaders, and independent political notables retired from electoral politics.<sup>17</sup> This *chaeya* (literally, "out in the field") opposition movement relied mostly on moral appeals and did not challenge the hegemonic discourses of the authoritarian regime, such as pro-Americanism, developmentalism, and anticommunism, but simply called for a restoration of democracy. With this petty-bourgeois nature, it focused more on voicing political protests in the street than attempting to build an organizational support base among the masses. When political opportunities opened following the breakdown of the Yusin regime in October 1979, the opposition movement

was unable to lead and coordinate the explosive waves of the spontaneous mass actions. As a result, the new military effectively tore down and gagged this old-style movement after Kwangju's demise.

The foundation for building the new opposition movement<sup>18</sup> in the early 1980s was laid by an assessment of what went wrong during the Seoul Spring. Most prominent in the analysis of movement leaders were three aspects of the Kwangju uprising. First, the fact that the people's own armed forces killed the very citizens whom they were supposed to protect led to questions about the nature of the repressive state in Korea. Second, the United States, conventionally viewed as a promoter of liberal democracy and an ally, was now condemned for its complicity in the bloodshed. Third, the Kwangju uprising was viewed not just as a massacre but also as a heroic struggle against the repressive state.

The foremost influence the Kwangju uprising exerted on the new movement was on the formation of a sustainable, militant set of "collective action frames"<sup>19</sup> around which the populace could be mobilized. The bloody suppression of the uprising led the movement to discard its past reliance on the conventional discourse of "voice protest" and "responsive care from a Confucian state." Just as in the Tiananmen Square massacre, any hope that "the people's voices will be heard" had been ruthlessly trampled down. In the PRC, where the repressive regime is dependent, at least formally, on communist ideology, this experience led the post-Tiananmen movement to discard its hope in the CCP and to rely more on liberal ideology. In a reverse parallel, Korean democrats, under a repressive regime with the facade of liberal democracy, discarded their hope in liberal democracy and sought a radical solution.

A fad of radical social theories ranging from dependency/world system theory, neo-Marxist theories, Marxism-Leninism, and Maoism to even the North Korean ideology of Juche-ism swept through the movement's leadership.<sup>20</sup> The leaders now designated Korean society as (colonial) state monopoly capitalism in the service of foreign and domestic monopoly capital, and the Chun regime as a fascist state that repressed the masses, or *minjung*. The United States, as the representative of world capitalism and protector of foreign capital, was portrayed as the sponsor of the military dictatorship. Alleged U.S. complicity in the Kwangju bloodshed was seen as proof. Therefore, a revolutionary change, not reform, was deemed necessary. From a reading of the heroic saga of the Kwangju *minjung*, who fought against the state until being slain, new movement leaders, now baptized with radical theories, confirmed the revolutionary potential of the *minjung* and focused on organizing and mobilizing labor, peasants, and the urban poor.

The collective action frames of the new movement quickly gained support among young activists in the early 1980s and became a handy resource in

fighting the regime, as well as in recruiting supporters. Since the government concealed the real story behind the uprising, a revelation of what happened in Kwangju turned out to be a powerful instrument to arouse action. Under the harsh repression of 1980–1983, this process of enlightenment powered underground organizations and the inversionary discourse summarized above. The name "Kwangju" came to symbolize righteousness against the repressive dictatorship.

While consensus formation produces a collective definition of a situation, for collective action to occur, "consensus mobilization" is necessary, consisting of deliberate attempts to spread the views of the movement among parts of a population.<sup>21</sup> The regime's turn from outright repression to liberalization after December 1983 provided a timely environment for consensus mobilization. From campuses to streets, churches, and workplaces, activists enthusiastically staged campaigns to mobilize consensus for the collective action frames. Again "Kwangju" was utilized as a living text to show how cruel and illegitimate the Chun regime was and what the nature of the United States was. Consensus mobilization was also facilitated by the ritualization of "Kwangju." Each year in May, nationwide student demonstrations were held in memory of the Kwangju uprising. Important sites of the Kwangju saga, such as Kŭmnam Avenue and Mangwŏl-dong cemetery, became sacred places. Kwangju turned into "symbolic capital" that could be invested against the hegemonic discourse of Chun authoritarianism.

Such a consensus mobilization based on the legacy of Kwangju had several important effects on the democratization movement. First, it provided the movement with strong symbolic power to resist waves of repression and fueled extreme forms of protests, including seventeen self-immolations and four persons who leaped out of tall buildings to their death.<sup>22</sup> Second, the new consensus supported the movement's efforts to build mass-oriented organizations, including Mint'ongnyŏn, or "Popular movement coalition for democracy and reunification," and facilitated linkages among them for a unified front, such as Kungmin undong ponbu, or "Headquarters for the national movement." In fact, these were the central forces behind a series of mass mobilizations in post-1985 politics, including the June 1987 Struggle. In a highly symbolic move, the last march by a crowd of more than a million, on July 9, 1987, was a funeral procession for Yi Hanyŏl, a student from Kwangju killed by a tear gas canister. At the end of the procession, Yi was buried in the Mangwŏl-dong cemetery alongside those killed during the Kwangju uprising. Finally, the anti-Americanism of the movement compelled Washington to encourage gradual democratic reform in Korea and to prevent the Chun regime from implementing another authoritarian regression.

### Deterring a Military Solution in June 1987

As already noted, the relative power between regime and opposition is crucial in determining the outcome of a prolonged struggle in an authoritarian polity. If the power of an authoritarian regime, measured in both physical and political power, does not overwhelm the opposition, the cost of repression in the eyes of authoritarian leaders exceeds the cost of toleration. In such circumstances the regime tends to try to extricate itself from governmental power as soon as possible. If the power of an authoritarian regime is perceived to be equal to that of the opposition, a deadlock emerges and mutual incentives to negotiate grow. In this case, conventional theories contend that a split between hard-liners and soft-liners within the regime elite facilitates the choice of a negotiated transition to democracy.<sup>23</sup> If the power of an authoritarian regime is perceived to be weaker than that of the opposition, the opposition would be inclined to opt for a rupture strategy rather than a negotiated reform.

The situation in June 1987 in South Korea resembled the second type, stalemate. Researchers, however, have not found a meaningful division within the regime bloc.<sup>24</sup> Rather, the general understanding so far has been that top regime leaders, including Chun and his hand-picked successor Roh Tae Woo, did not disagree over the policy turn toward a negotiated exit from the standoff in June 1987.<sup>25</sup> The question then turns to what made them change their minds.

**TABLE 6.2**  
Elite Perception of Relative Power, June 1987

Q: "There are many different opinions about the relative power between the regime and opposition in June 1987 before the June 29 Statement. Which of the following three opinions is the closest to yours?"

Response	Regime Elite	Opposition Elite	Total
The regime was strong enough and could have continued for a long time.	13 (52.0)	1 (3.8)	14 (27.5)
Neither was the regime in the condition of continuance, nor was the opposition in a position to overthrow.	7 (28.0)	10 (38.5)	17 (33.3)
The opposition was very strong and could have overthrown the regime.	5 (20.0)	15 (57.7)	20 (39.2)
Total	25 (100.0)	26 (100.0)	51 (100.0)

Chi-square = 15.80; DF = 2; P = 0.00037.  
Numbers out of parentheses = number of cases; numbers in parentheses = percentage.

In the summer of 1996, I conducted a survey of sixty-one top political leaders from 1987 in both the government and opposition movement. They were senior government officials, national assemblymen from the opposition party, government ministers in charge of interior and political affairs, high-ranking Blue House staffers, heads of the National Security Planning Agency and Defense Security Command, and democratic movement leaders.<sup>26</sup> Table 6.2 shows that in June 1987 a majority of the regime elite were fairly confident about the regime's likelihood of surviving the crisis while a majority of the opposition elite also had a high level of confidence in their power to overthrow the regime.<sup>27</sup> The confidence on both sides suggests that each side was likely to pursue all-or-nothing strategies rather than attempt to extricate themselves from the deadlock.

In a situation in which protesters overpowered riot police in the street, the regime's choice of repression depended on the availability of the military option, as well as on how much confidence the power elite had in using such a method. Given the absence of a crack within the regime, Chun should have had little problem in calling troops onto the streets. The military solution, however, did not win a consensus among the power elite. As table 6.3 shows, more than one-half of the regime elites believed that military suppression was not a viable alternative. Among those who thought a military solution could be a way to restore law and order, none had strong confidence in it. Under these circumstances, Chun was unlikely to depend on the military to solve the crisis. Although he did attempt to deploy the armed forces to crack down on

**TABLE 6.3**  
Elite Perception of Military Suppression as an Alternative

Q: <sup>a</sup> "Now please be reminded of the situation in June 1987. Do you think such a forceful suppression by the military could have been one way available to the government to maintain law and order during that period of social unrest?"

Response	Regime Elite	Opposition Elite	Total
Strongly yes	0 (0.0)	4 (15.4)	4 (7.8)
Yes	12 (48.0)	10 (38.5)	22 (43.1)
No	11 (44.0)	9 (34.6)	20 (39.2)
Strongly no	2 (8.0)	3 (11.5)	5 (9.8)
Total	25 (100.0)	26 (100.0)	51 (99.9)

<sup>a</sup>In the survey, this question came immediately following a question asking for a personal evaluation of the regime's military suppression of the Kwangju uprising in 1980.

protests on June 19, he cancelled these orders hours later and turned to negotiation with the opposition.

One might argue that the sheer power of the democratic forces prevented the Chun government from using the military.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, however strong it may be, the people's power alone is not sufficient to explain a cohesive, strong authoritarian regime's decision to abstain from a military mobilization. There are many cases in which greater people's power was effectively broken down by military action. The Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and the Burmese massacres in 1988–1990 are recent examples. Hence we need to consider more direct causes for elites' hesitation to mobilize the military.

The survey results suggest that the legacy of Kwangju contributed to the regime elites' reluctance to use the military option. First, the projected negative consequences of the use of the military were amplified by what the Korean leaders learned from Kwangju in 1980. As noted earlier, the Kwangju massacre, as a "birth defect," continued to plague Chun Doo Hwan throughout his rule. The regime tried to defend itself with the logic that the military suppression of Kwangju was necessary to ensure national security and political stability. Nevertheless, it was not able to convince even some of the regime's core elites. Table 6.4 shows that only twelve among twenty-three regime elites agreed that the bloody suppression of the Kwangju uprising was necessary.

In addition, given radical protest tactics such as suicides and violent attacks, soldiers, once in the streets, would respond violently. That not only would have violated Chun's pledge of a peaceful transfer of power, but perhaps more importantly would also have spoiled the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul. It is noteworthy that at every critical moment in the post-1985 politics of liberalization, Chun repeatedly emphasized that he was able and ready to use military force to settle matters, but he never actually mobilized the forces.<sup>29</sup> In a personal interview with the author, he mentioned that once the military in-

**TABLE 6.4**  
**Elite Opinion on the Regime's Justification for Suppressing Kwangju**

Q: "The Kwangju incident of 1980 had a strong impact on the political process in the 1980s. Some argue that the violent suppression of the Kwangju uprising was necessary to ensure national security and stability. Do you agree or disagree with that argument?"

Response	Regime Elites	Opposition Elites
Strongly agree	3 (13.0)	NA
Tend to agree	9 (39.1)	2 (8.0)
Tend to disagree	8 (34.8)	1 (4.0)
Strongly disagree	3 (13.0)	22 (88.0)
Total	23 (100.0)	25 (100.0)

truded into the civilian realm, it would become difficult to control their abuses of power.<sup>30</sup> He particularly seemed to have Kwangju in mind as he calculated the potential cost of repression when dealing with the popular demand for democratic reform.

Second, Kwangju affected the manner and extent of the U.S. government's intervention to deter a military solution. From the early period of the June crisis of 1987, Washington was actively involved in inducing both the Chun regime and the opposition to the negotiating table. On the one hand, the United States attempted to enhance the option of toleration on the part of the Chun regime by assuring Washington's support for the government and for its promises of political liberalization. At the same time the United States sought to deter repression by pointing to the improbability of the hard-line solution and by appealing directly to Korean military leaders to refrain from political intervention. As a result, after a meeting with U.S. Ambassador James Lilley on June 19, Chun canceled his order to deploy the armed forces to the cities. The United States also urged the opposition not to resort to extremist positions but to negotiate with the regime.

Washington's stance lay in part in its policy of encouraging the democratization of friendly nations, which it pursued successfully in Haiti and the Philippines. However, the primary reason was obviously related to U.S. interests in maintaining stability and in preventing the growth of anti-Americanism in Korea. The opposition's accusation of U.S. complicity in the suppression of Kwangju fueled anti-American sentiment among Koreans, dramatically demonstrated when the U.S. Cultural Center in Pusan was burned down in March 1982 and the U.S. Information Service in downtown Seoul was seized in May 1985. A further expansion of anti-Americanism in Korea would have posed a major problem for U.S. strategic interests in the region even beyond Korea. It is noteworthy that American officials in June 1987 took visible action to demonstrate to the Korean people that the United States was on the side of democracy<sup>31</sup> and sought preventive measures to avoid losing control of the flow of events, as they did in 1980. The U.S. government seemed to have learned from the past.

### The Legacy of the Kwangju Uprising in Democratic Consolidation

Literature on comparative democratization has shown that regime transition is path dependent.<sup>32</sup> The types of transition, determined by the power of the authoritarian regime relative to the opposition, constrain the post-transition process toward democratic consolidation. Among the three main types of transition—collapse/defeat/withdrawal, extrication, and reform/transaction,

in the order of the authoritarian regime's relative strength from weakest to strongest<sup>33</sup>—the South Korean case belongs to the “reform/transaction” type.<sup>34</sup> Similar cases include Spain in 1975–1976, Hungary in 1989, Poland in 1989, Brazil in the 1980s, Taiwan in the 1990s, and Chile in 1990.<sup>35</sup> Countries that have experienced this type of democratic transition exhibit strong continuity between the outgoing authoritarian regime and the incoming democratically elected regime. Democracy tends to be limited within a certain range, such as the introduction of competitive elections alone, while both the widening and deepening of democratic reform are likely to stall or be postponed. Therefore, to consolidate democracy, the necessary next step is to remove (or at least reduce the extent of) nondemocratic elements that undermine the operation of democratic politics. Of course, the first elected government, in affinity with the defunct dictatorship, tries to impede such a process. Hence, *protracted* struggle can be expected during the post-transition process between the government and the resurgent democratic opposition, which claims that democracy has yet to be achieved.

In Korea's post-transition politics following 1987, the legacy of the Kwangju uprising exerted strong influence over this protracted struggle. First, as in the pre-transition period, Kwangju continued as a rallying point from which the opposition pressured the new government to implement more democratic reforms. With more and more details concerning Kwangju unveiled by the liberalized press in the post-transition environment, the government became further and further constrained by the opposition's demand for investigating the government's suppression of the uprising and for punishing those responsible. A series of congressional hearings in late 1988 on the Kwangju massacre along with other wrongdoings of the defunct Chun regime was the culmination of the opposition-led National Assembly's attempts to seize the political initiative and force the incumbent Roh Tae Woo government toward reform. The opposition was able to force the resignation from the National Assembly of ex-General Chung Ho-yŏng, the former special war commander and army chief of staff who was strongly suspected of having directed the paratroopers in Kwangju in May 1980.

Second, the legacy of the Kwangju uprising was instrumental in Roh's attempt to sever links with Chun and other authoritarian allies and to push the “forward legitimacy” of democratic reform. The aforementioned congressional hearings on the Kwangju uprising in late 1988 and the subsequent congressional inquiries, which ended with Chun's testimony to the National Assembly on December 31, 1989, provided Roh with the decisive momentum to disassociate himself from his former boss, who had anointed him as successor. Cultivating the heightened public mood against the former regime through a vivid display of political theater on the massacre and other

evils, Roh not only forced Chun into self-exile at a remote Buddhist temple but also purged his cronies from powerful posts. The removal of General Ch'oe P'yŏng-uk from the Defense Security Command in November 1988 served as a representative example. Such an effort to uproot pro-Chun forces facilitated the subordination of the military to the elected government, without which the bold purge in 1993, undertaken by the next president, Kim Yong Sam, would have been much more risky and difficult, if not impossible.<sup>36</sup>

The legacy of the Kwangju uprising also played a big part in bringing ex-presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo to trial in December 1995. Both the conspicuousness of Kwangju in Korea's democratization struggle and the temporal proximity of May 1980 generated a high level of grievance among Koreans against the authoritarian perpetrators. When, in the summer of 1995, the Kim Yong Sam government decided not to prosecute the leaders of the past regime, it fueled nationwide protests, ultimately forcing Kim to reverse his decision.<sup>37</sup>

Comparative studies of democratization caution against such a trial of previous authoritarian leaders because it may invite instability or breakdown in the incipient democracy.<sup>38</sup> Such action may arouse considerable discontent from a portion of the population, including the elite, that sympathizes with the former regime (as in Spain after Franco), or the military might consider the legal proceedings a serious threat to its own existence (as in Argentina under Alfonsín). Neither happened in South Korea, where the “trials of the century” invited not a high degree of political instability but rather a greater consolidation of democracy by firmly bringing to a close the legacy of military rule and political violence.<sup>39</sup> Korea showed that it had advanced toward a mature democracy.<sup>40</sup>

### Conclusion

South Korea has experienced a dramatic democratization over the last two decades, and the legacy of the Kwangju uprising has been one of the main facilitating factors in the process. It weakened military dictator Chun Doo Hwan's legitimacy to the extent that he had to resort to the claim of a “transitory” regime that promised an ultimate return to democracy. This constrained the range of alternatives at his disposal. On the other hand, Kwangju furnished the opposition movement with ample resources for a strong, militant collective action to resist waves of authoritarian repression. It was in this context that the Chun regime refrained from using military force to quell the popular demand for democratic reform in the mid-1980s.

Despite the reformist path of the Korean democratic transition, continued progress in democratic consolidation after the first competitive election in 1987 was in no way guaranteed. In this context, the legacy of the Kwangju uprising again turned out to be a main facilitator of democratization. Through a protracted process of investigation and punishment of those responsible for the Kwangju tragedy, the opposition was able to grasp reform initiatives in 1988–1989, while the authoritarian-turned-civilian government under Roh Tae Woo utilized these circumstances to sever its link with the past. In the 1990s, the authoritarian past was discredited through the trials of previous authoritarian leaders, made possible in large part by the emotionally charged memory of Kwangju, while the democratic consensus was consolidated.

### Notes

1. English-language surveys of South Korea's democratization process include, among many others, Hyug Baeg Im, "Politics of Transition: Democratic Transition from Authoritarian Rule in South Korea" (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1989); James Cotton, "From Authoritarianism to Democracy in South Korea," *Political Studies* 37 (1989): 244–59; Sung-joo Han, "South Korea: Politics in Transition," in Larry Diamond, Juan J. Linz, and Seymour Martin Lipset, eds., *Democracy in Developing Countries: Asia*, vol. 3 (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989); Wonmo Dong, "University Students in South Korean Politics: Patterns of Radicalization in the 1980s," *Journal of International Affairs* 40 (1987): 233–55; Doh Chul Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Larry Diamond and Byung-Kook Kim, eds., *Consolidating Democracy in South Korea* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2000); and Jung-kwan Cho, "From Authoritarianism to Consolidated Democracy in South Korea" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2000).

2. The Tiananmen Square massacre is selected for comparison on the grounds that it showed considerable similarity with the Kwangju uprising in the cultural context as well as striking parallels in the process of collective action. For details, see Karen Eggleston, "Kwangju 1980 and Beijing 1989," *Asian Perspective* 15, no. 2 (1991): 33–73.

3. Juan J. Linz defined authoritarian regimes as "political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive or intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within formally ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones." "Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes," in Fred I. Greenstein and Nelson W. Polsby, eds., *Handbook of Political Science*, vol. 3, *Macropolitical Theory* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1975), 264.

4. The literature on democratization is too large to summarize. To briefly survey the factors identified by social scientists to date, see Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991). For representative works of theoretical and comparative treat-

ments, see Guillermo O'Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds., *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 5 vols. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

5. Quote from Juan J. Linz, *The Breakdown of Democratic Regimes: Crisis, Breakdown, and Reequilibration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 16.

6. Regime legitimacy should be distinguished from performance legitimacy, or efficacy. While regime legitimacy refers to a level of belief among the ruled and rulers in the way in which a political system is institutionalized, performance legitimacy is more or less a level of belief in the policy outcomes and is subject to temporal fluctuation. Although the continued low performance of a political regime or an extreme level of crisis resulting from a policy failure may lead to the erosion of regime legitimacy, the distinction between efficacy and regime legitimacy is necessary for an analysis of regime change. Individual governments fall due to policy failures and the consequential decline of popularity. However, the demise of political regimes needs further erosion of public belief in the institutions itself. See Linz, *Breakdown of Democratic Regimes*, 18–22.

7. A classic argument on the importance of revolutionary legitimacy as a confining condition is found in Otto Kirchheimer, "Confining Conditions and Revolutionary Breakthroughs," *American Political Science Review* 59 (1965): 964–74. Mexico under the PRI and Cuba under Castro are other examples of strong regimes established through revolution.

8. For extensive theoretical and empirical treatment on the distinction between a hierarchical and a nonhierarchical military regime, see Linz and Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition*, especially 66–68.

9. P. Nikoforos Diamandouros, "Regime Change and the Prospects for Democracy in Greece: 1974–1983," in O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Southern Europe*, 153.

10. For an extensive treatment of China's civil society, see Barrett L. McCormick, Su Shaozhi, and Xiao Xiaoming, "The 1989 Democracy Movement: A Review of the Prospects for Civil Society in China," *Pacific Affairs* 65 (1992): 182–202.

11. For a comprehensive treatment of the U.S.-Korean relationship, see Baeho Hahn, "Major Issues in the American-Korean Alliance," in Youngnok Koo and Dae-sook Suh, eds., *Korea and the United States: A Century of Cooperation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1984), 91–110; and Wookhee Shin, "Geopolitical Determinants of Political Economy: The Cold War and South Korean Political Economy," *Asian Perspective* 18, no. 2 (1994): 119–40.

12. Yang Zhong, "Legitimacy Crisis and Legitimation in China," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 26, no. 2 (1996): 201–20.

13. From the beginning, ideologues of the Chun Doo Hwan regime justified the establishment of the Fifth Republic by stressing its contribution to political development through the introduction of a presidential term limit. Hur Mun Do, interview by author, Seoul, July 8, 1996.

14. The size of the presidential electoral college under the Yusin regime was 2,359 in 1972 and 2,583 in 1978. The first and only electoral college of the Fifth Republic was more than double this size, consisting of 5,278 in February 1981.



15. A ruling party's opinion survey conducted from October 29 to November 13, 1983, found that Koreans gave high approval to the economic performance of the government while retaining considerable distrust of the government's pledge for a single presidential term. Jong Ryul Rhee, *Chönhwan'gi üi nollu wa hyönsil* [Logic and reality of Korean politics in transition] (Seoul: Pagyöngsa, 1988), 13–29.

16. A few exemplary works (among others) in regard to framing issues on the Korean democratization movements include Chulhee Chung, "Structure, Culture, and Mobilization: The Origins of the June Uprising in South Korea" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 1994); and Joon-Oh Jang, "Discourses on the Korean Student Movement in the 1980s: Democracy as a Master Frame" (Ph.D. diss., University of Kansas, 1994).

The other two most important factors in the movement's power are political opportunities and mobilizing structure. Major works in this paradigm of "political process theory" include Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action, and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Doug McAdam, John D. McCarthy, and Mayer N. Zald, eds., *Comparative Perspectives on Social Movements: Political Opportunities, Mobilizing Structures, and Cultural Framings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

17. For details on the opposition movement in the 1970s, see Hak-Kyu Sohn, *Authoritarianism and Opposition in South Korea* (London: Routledge, 1989).

18. I do not mean that there was a break or a quantum leap between the old style and the new movement, however. The seeds for the new movement were already growing in the late 1970s. As protests continued to deepen against the *Yusin* regime, the *chaeya* expanded in number and in the variety of occupations and social statuses. It gradually changed into a kind of a peak organization over the sectoral movement organizations led by young activists. The young leaders with a background mostly as student movement dropouts in the late 1960s and the early 1970s became more inclined to a strategy of building mass mobilization than to relying on verbal and symbolic protests from prominent figures alone. However, under the accelerating repression of the *Yusin* regime, such a transformation was slow and did not produce substantial outcomes. The only exception (though it was premature and quickly defeated by the authorities) that attempted to substantially organize a mass movement under a strong elite leadership was the case of *Namminjön*, short for *Namjosön minjok haebang chönsön* (National liberation front for South Korea). For a study of *Namminjön* and other movements, see Hee Yeon Cho, *Hyöndaie han'guk sahoe undong kwa chojik* [Contemporary social movements and organizations in Korea] (Seoul: Hanul, 1993).

19. For details on collective action frames, see Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 22–23, 118–34.

20. An excellent study in English on the evolution of the Korean movement's discourse is found in Gi-Wook Shin, "Marxism, Anti-Americanism, and Democracy in South Korea: An Examination of Nationalist Intellectual Discourse," *Positions* 3 (1995): 508–34.

21. Hank Johnston and Bert Klandermans, eds., *Social Movements and Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); and Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 124.

22. In contrast, only one case of protest by self-immolation (by Chön T'aeil) was reported in the 1970s. The numbers are based on "O'lpal wanjön haegyöl kwa chöngü silhyön hüimangül wihan kwagö ch'öngsan kungmin wiwönhoe" (National committee for the purge of the past in order to completely resolve the May 18 problems and to realize justice), *Minjok minju yölsa, hüsaengja, üimunsä myöngye hoebogül wihan che-ich'a haksulhoe üi charyojip* [Proceedings of the second conference on the restoration of honor for martyrs, victims and those who suffered suspicious deaths] (Seoul, 1997), 140.

23. O'Donnell and Schmitter assert that "there is no transition whose beginning is not the consequences—direct or indirect—of important divisions within the authoritarian regime itself, principally along the fluctuating cleavage between hard-liners and soft-liners" (see *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule*, 19).

24. For a representative work that argues the existence of the hard-line/soft-line split, see Hyug Baeg Im, "Politics of Transition: Democratic Transition from Authoritarian Rule in South Korea." However, many empirical studies conducted in the 1990s, when more data became available, found a stronger cohesion within the regime and an absence of a meaningful split over policies. For instance, see Dae Hwa Chung, "Han'guk üi chöngch'i pyöndong 1987–1992 [Political change in Korea, 1987–1992]" (Ph.D. diss., Seoul National University, 1995).

25. Söng Ik Kim, *Chön Tu-hwan yuksöng chüngön* [Real voice testimony by Chun Doo Hwan] (Seoul: Chosön ilbosa, 1992); and Cho Kap-je, "No T'ae-u yuksöng hoegorok" (Real voice memoirs of Roh Tae Woo), *Wölgan chosön*, June 1999, 207–20.

26. Sixty-one political elites (twenty-eight regime and thirty-three opposition elites) in 1987 were personally interviewed by the author between May and June 1996. The total number of responses reported in this paper is not sixty-one, however, because the time limit, which varied from interview to interview, often prevented the author from asking all the questions in the prepared interview questionnaire. For more details on the elite survey, including selection methods and full questionnaire, see Jung-kwan Cho, "From Authoritarianism to Consolidated Democracy in South Korea."

27. The sources of such confidence on the regime's side were, first of all, confidence in achievements by the regime, a high level of internal cohesiveness within the regime, availability of powerful and disciplined military forces, existence of a considerable proportion of conservative, stability-oriented people, and weakness in the organized opposition. The sources of the opposition's confidence lay in, first, the lowest level of legitimacy of the authoritarian regime at the point, the cohesiveness of the opposition converged into the *Kungmin undong ponbu* (Headquarters for national movements for a democratic constitution), and a high level of spontaneous visible support for democracy from the middle and lower classes, growing in quality and quantity through increasingly affluent economic conditions.

28. Most accounts by individual regime elites of 1987 emphasize this point. For example, see Kim Yong-gap, *Kojiga paro chöginde yesö mal sunün öpta* [So close to the top of the mountain, we cannot stop here] (Seoul: Muae, 1991); and Jong Ryul Rhee, *Tae-gwön üi chubyön* [Around the presidential power] (Seoul: Naeil, 1991).

29. Söng Ik Kim, *Chön Tu-hwan yuksöng chüngön*, passim.

30. Interview at his house in Seoul on August 22, 1998. I am grateful to Dr. Sang-Hyon Yoon for arranging the interview, and to the NEAC Council on Korean Studies of the Association for Asian Studies for a travel grant.

31. In regard to the elite consensus on Korean policies in Washington at the time, it is helpful to see Stephen Solarz, "Applying Leverages on South Korea," *New York Times*, May 17, 1987. Solarz was chairman of the House Subcommittee on Pacific and Asian Affairs.

32. Representative works calling for path dependency include Terry Lynn Karl, "Dilemmas of Democratization in Latin America," *Comparative Politics* 23, no. 1 (1990): 1-21; Terry Lynn Karl and Philippe Schmitter, "Modes of Transition in Latin America, Southern and Eastern Europe," *International Social Science Journal* 128 (1991): 269-84.

33. For details of the tripology, see J. Samuel Valenzuela, "Democratic Consolidation in Post-Transitional Settings: Notion, Process, and Facilitating Conditions," in Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 73-78; and Scott Mainwaring, "Transitions to Democracy and Democratic Consolidation: Theoretical and Comparative Issues," in *Issues in Democratic Consolidation*, 317-26. Samuel P. Huntington adopted the same categorization but with different terminology: replacement, transplacement, and transformation (*Third Wave*, 114).

34. The South Korean case does not fit into the first category because the outgoing authoritarian rulers held on to power significantly beyond the crisis that set off the transition. Nor does it belong to the "extrication" category because this category requires much weaker power of the outgoing rulers than that of Korea. In the case of extrication, the outgoing rulers should be more or less trying to negotiate a minimal set of terms for their retreat. In 1987 Korea, the authoritarian regime could impose terms and conditions with relatively powerful strength and confidence. It did not have to install a safety outlet, such as reserved domains and military prerogatives, as shown in Uruguay in 1985 and Peru in 1980. During the transition the Korean case showed no sign of breaking the formal rules and framework of the outgoing authoritarian regime. For details on the definition of the Korean path to democratic transition, see Jung-kwan Cho, "From Authoritarianism to Consolidated Democracy in South Korea."

35. The comparatively stronger imposition of an authoritarian legacy to the next democratic government made the Chilean case an exceptional one even in the "reform" category, however.

36. On the taming of the Korean military after the democratic transition of 1987, see Jung-kwan Cho, "Taming the Military to Consolidate Democracy: The South Korean Experience," *Pacific Focus* 16, no. 1 (2001): 117-48.

37. For details, see Sunhyuk Kim, "From Resistance to Representation: Civil Society in South Korean Democratization" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1996), chap. 6.

38. Huntington, *Third Wave*, 211-31; and Alexandra Barahona de Brito, *Human Rights and Democratization in Latin America: Uruguay and Chile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

39. Survey results reported by Doh Chul Shin show evidence of increasing democratic consensus through the trials. See Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture*, 216-18.

40. However, the trials also carried negative effects on democratic development, especially in terms of the rule of law, which should be consolidated to develop a stable democracy. For details, see James M. West, "Martial Lawlessness: The Legal Aftermath of Kwangju," *Pacific Rim Law and Policy Journal* 6 (January 1997): 85-168.