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Political  
Development in  
Korea: Achievements  
and Prospects

*By The Honorable Choi Chang-Yoon*



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# POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN KOREA: ACHIEVEMENTS AND PROSPECTS

by The Honorable Choi Chang-Yoon

The Republic of Korea long ago adopted liberal democracy as its political foundation and political development has remained one of the nation's chief objectives. When President Chun Doo Hwan was sworn into office in 1981, he stated that his administration's first and foremost goal was to establish a stable democracy in Korea. Accordingly, the 1980s began to see substantive progress in political modernization.

Over the last seven years, the government has taken a number of concrete democratization initiatives. First of all, a set of liberal reforms was undertaken, including the lifting of the decades-old midnight curfew, the easing of overseas travel restrictions, discarding of the military-style uniforms for secondary school students, restoration of political rights for those who had been barred from political activities, and expansion of freedoms of expression.

**Record Economic Growth.** The economy has also been a focal point of the government's liberalization efforts. Government intervention and control were boldly replaced by private initiative, which has given vitality and dynamism to the nation's economy. Under President Chun, Korea has continued its record economic growth, moving from a developing to a newly industrialized nation. With 12.2 percent growth in 1986, Korea today ranks twentieth in the world in terms of gross national product, twelfth in terms of trade, and is now at the threshold of achieving advanced nation status.

Such policies created a more open political and social climate leading to public demands for political development commensurate with economic and social achievements. Not surprisingly, the political system is facing new challenges, including increased public criticism of government policies, vigorous debate among political groups, student activism on campuses, labor disputes, and demands for greater basic human rights. These challenges must be accepted by any developing country that aims to move forward.

**Irreversible Liberalization.** Koreans today will meet these challenges positively and successfully and turn them into opportunities to fashion a more open, creative, and responsible political system. The trend toward liberalization will continue to remain an important feature of Korea's socio-political landscape and will continue to mobilize the energy and creativity of the Korean people for social and political success. Korea is firmly set on the course of liberalization and openness and no social force can reverse this trend.

Furthermore, an effort has been made to create a smaller and more efficient government. Two centuries ago, Thomas Jefferson wisely said that "government is best

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which governs least." Even in the 1980s, we Koreans would do well to remember his maxim.

During the high growth period of the 1960s and 1970s, it was all but inevitable for the central government to expand. With a much broader based middle class, an increasingly strong and more independent business community, a growing industrial labor force, a new breed of efficient technocrats, and a population of over 41 million, Korean society has become too big and complex to be managed by the government alone.

Initial steps to limit government include the reduction in the size of the bureaucracy and the reduction of the government workforce during the last six years. Not only did the government begin to sell its shares in the national banks, it also turned over ownership of government-owned enterprises to the private sector. Along with the government's democratization programs, Korea will further push toward a smaller government.

**Local Autonomy.** Perhaps the most significant action taken by the government for political democratization was the decision to reinstate a system of local political autonomy. The constitution of the 1970s stipulated that local parliaments be installed only after the reunification of Korea, which in essence blocked any realistic chance for local autonomy in the near future.

President Chun took an entirely different approach toward the issue of local self-rule. The current plan calls for local parliaments to be gradually introduced depending upon the capacity of each locality to support its own government financially. Toward this end, the government has set up a research commission and drafted bills providing for local elections and other measures. Legislation to implement local parliaments is now awaiting deliberation in the National Assembly by January of 1988. A local autonomy system will become a historic catalyst for further democratization in Korea.

**New Era of Democracy.** In a sense, these measures for political democratization are harbingers of another historic event to take place in 1988. For the first time in Korea's history, a peaceful change of presidential power, as stipulated in the Constitution and as pledged repeatedly by President Chun, will take place in about ten months. Though this represents nothing out of the ordinary from the American and West European perspective, the upcoming transfer of presidential power will be a landmark in the 40-year history of Korea's constitutional process. During this period, there were eight constitutional changes, each one aimed primarily at prolonging the tenure of the Chief Executive. These became major obstacles for Korea in establishing a stable and democratic form of government.

Since the institutionalization of an orderly political succession is essential to democracy, the significance of President Chun's determination cannot be overemphasized. It is the personal desire of President Chun that he be recognized by his fellow countrymen as the former president who for the first time firmly planted a democratic system on Korean soil.

## **Current Issues**

President Chun made it his personal goal to open a "new era of political democratization" in Korea and initiated significant political reforms over the past six years. During this process, the issue of constitutional revision became an issue of intense public debate.

**The Single-Term Presidency.** Initially, President Chun repeatedly expressed his belief that the current Constitution was best suited to consigning the vicious cycle of protracted personal rule to history and to firmly establishing Korean democracy. Accordingly, he felt it would not be wise to amend the Constitution before its single-term presidency clause had been implemented even once.

From the beginning of 1986, however, demands to consider constitutional revision came not only from those in the opposition camp but also from other segments of Korean society, and confrontations began between the ruling party and the opposition. This soon created political tension, which had the potential of endangering national harmony and unity and even imperiling the success of the 1986 Asian Games.

Accordingly, on April 30 last year, President Chun met with the leaders of the three major political parties and announced that he would not oppose constitutional reform even during his tenure so long as the ruling and opposition parties could agree on a new Constitution and recommend it for popular referendum through legislative action. The way to constitutional reform by consensus was thus opened.

The opposition proposed a presidential system of government with the direct popular election of the president, while the government party favored a parliamentary cabinet system. During the past year, there has been heated debate and sharp disagreement over which system of government would best promote democratization of Korea and continued national development.

Allow me to explain briefly the political reasoning behind the government party's support of a parliamentary cabinet system.

**Ending Bloody Strife.** In the past, the direct election system produced presidents who came to possess an enormous concentration of power. Moreover, direct elections tended to bring bloody and divisive strife. The elected candidate became the core of political power and the losing candidate the leader of the anti-government forces. This often created serious confrontations between the government and opposition forces which even endangered national security.

A parliamentary cabinet system would make transfer of power much easier and prolonged one-man rule much more difficult. Under a parliamentary system, political power would be decentralized and political institutions such as the national assembly, political parties, and interest groups would be strengthened.

On the other hand, the opposition insisted upon relating every socio-political issue to its goal of the direct election of the president. The opposition remains adamant that the direct election of the president is the only way to democratize and that there can be no compromise whatsoever on that issue.

Moreover, the main opposition New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP) boycotted the ad hoc National Assembly committee for constitutional reform, even though it had demanded its creation for months. It did so in spite of the fact that the ruling party agreed to give the opposition bloc 50 percent of the committee membership, a considerable concession on the part of the majority party. Nevertheless, the opposition NKDP simply declared it would

not participate in the ad hoc committee until and unless its proposed form of government was accepted. There was thus practically no dialogue on how to amend the basic law.

**Shadow Opposition.** To complicate the situation even more, the shadow opposition leaders who call themselves "the real powers" behind the NKDP forced their party repeatedly to abrogate procedural accords reached with the government party for fear that the NKDP might make some concessions and strike a deal with the ruling party. In fact, the opposition party President Lee Min Woo, with the support of moderates, proposed a democratization formula which focused on the substance of democratization. But his plan was angrily repudiated by the "real powers" and the extremists in the party. Out of their obsession with holding the NKDP assemblymen in line, the "real powers" maneuvered further to isolate the party's president and moderates and to disrupt its official decision-making apparatus.

With the opposition in total disarray, it was impossible to find any opposition representative ready for dialogue. Finally, the NKDP split and a new opposition party mainly consisting of hardliners was organized.

Only ten months remain before President Chun steps down. Presidential elections must be held at least two months before his term ends, leaving no more time to waste on futile debate. It would take several months to draft a new Constitution, pass it through the National Assembly and then refer it to a national referendum for adoption. Another few months would be needed to revise the election laws and other related legislation before elections could be held under an amended Constitution.

**Time Running Out.** If political confusion were to result from a protracted confrontation, this could imperil not only the scheduled peaceful change of government in February next year but also the 1988 Olympics to be hosted by Seoul. Such chaos could also drastically set back Korea's recent spectacular economic advancement. This, in turn, could tempt the North Korean Communists to undertake military action aimed at attaining their long-standing goal of communizing the entire Korean peninsula.

Time has run out and there have emerged no prospects for any early compromise solutions to the constitutional standoff. President Chun's decision on April 13 to postpone the debate on constitutional change until after the Olympics represents the only practical way out of the dilemma.

### **Future Directions**

Politics is said to be the art of the possible and a practice in negotiations and compromise. What Korea can do at this juncture is to redouble its efforts to enhance the substance of democratization. Of course, we will resume efforts to achieve constitutional amendment through consensus when the two important national tasks--a peaceful power transition and the Olympics--have been successfully completed.

**What James Madison Meant.** Democracy is a praxis, not a theory. This is what James Madison meant when he said that the American Constitution has existence, not on paper, but in the habits and dispositions of the American people. It is obvious that the resolution of the constitutional issue will be a major step toward political democratization. It can never be, however, the completion of the process itself.

The government and the ruling party are resolved even more steadfastly to continue their efforts to accomplish democratic development in Korea. The early implementation of a local autonomy system, which is considered to be the foundation of democracy, will represent an important step forward. Measures to facilitate expansion of the press and speech freedoms also are being taken. Furthermore, some persons detained for violating public security laws have been released.

**Rising Middle Class.** It is the view of the government and the ruling party that the preferable course toward democratization is a gradual and reasoned evolution, not revolutionary upheavals. The rising Korean middle class is too prosperous to embrace radical solutions. Koreans for the first time in their modern history have much to lose by upheaval. To promote genuine political democratization, Korea needs a gradual but consistent accumulation of democratic experience and institutions.

1988 will be a turning point in Korea's political development. President Chun will fulfill his pledge to carry out Korea's first peaceful transfer of power and will thereby inaugurate a new political era in this country. The Seoul Olympics will take place six months thereafter. It seems fitting that the glorious events of 1988 will coincide with the 40th anniversary of the founding of the Republic of Korea.

Let me conclude by suggesting that, in judging Korea's democratic progress, fair-minded observers would do well to consider not only where Korea is now, but how far Korea has come and the direction in which Korea is going.

