

International Political Science Review

<http://ips.sagepub.com/>

Institutionalization of Party Political Democracy and the Challenges of Stable Governance in South Korea

Cheol Hee Park

International Political Science Review 2009 30: 555

DOI: 10.1177/0192512109352294

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ips.sagepub.com/content/30/5/555>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

On behalf of:



International Political Science Association (IPSA)

Additional services and information for *International Political Science Review* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ips.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ips.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://ips.sagepub.com/content/30/5/555.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jan 7, 2010

[What is This?](#)



Institutionalization of Party Political Democracy and the Challenges of Stable Governance in South Korea

CHEOL HEE PARK

BOOKS REVIEWED

Choi, Jang Jip (2008). *Han-guk Minjujuui Mueosi Munjeinga* [What Is the Problem in the Korean Democracy?]. Seoul: Saengkak eui Namu.

Choi, Jang Jip, Park, Chan Pyo, and Park, Sang Hoon (2007). *Otteon Minjujuui Inga* [What Kind of Democracy?]. Seoul: Humanitas.

Chung, Jin Min (2008). *Han-gukui Jenngdang Jeongchiwa Daetongnyeongje Minjujuui* [Party Politics in Korea and Presidential Democracy]. Seoul: Ingansarang.

Jung, Young Tae (2005). *Han-guk Sahoe-ui Byeonhwa wa Jinbo Jeongdang* [Changes in Korean Society and The Progressive Political Party]. Incheon: Inha University Press.

Kang, Won Taek (2006). *Daetongnyeongje, Naegakjewa Iwon Jipjeongbuje* [Presidential System, Parliamentary System and Dual Executive System]. Seoul: Ingansarang.

Keywords: • South Korea • Democracy • Political Cleavage • Party Politics
• Democratic Consolidation • Governance

Twenty Years of Democratic Governance in South Korea

More than 20 years have passed since the democratic transition of South Korea in 1987. South Korea exemplifies a successful case of democratic consolidation. After the transition, five presidents have been elected through free, fair, and periodic elections and have experienced no disruptions to their political tenure. Several meaningful power transfers have occurred in South Korea as well. The election of Young Sam Kim represented a power transfer from a president with a former military background to a genuine civilian political leader. The election of Dae

Jung Kim signified a power transfer from a conservative to a progressive regime. Myung Bak Lee's victory in December 2007 again showed a peaceful power transfer from a liberal back to a conservative regime. Without doubt, democracy in a minimal sense has been firmly consolidated in South Korea.¹

However, this does not mean that South Korean democracy experienced flawless progress toward an institutionalized form of democratic governance. Civil movement groups contributed much to the democratic transition in South Korea,² but their continued proactive intervention in real politics hampers the effective exercise of presidential power. They tend to rely on extra-parliamentary tactics to deliver their message rather than working in the legitimately institutionalized political arena. Also, political parties have been reshuffled many times, especially in times of presidential and general elections. How to institutionalize party political dynamics remains a major challenge. Furthermore, the power of the South Korean president is regarded as being overly strong. How to keep the president under control while democratizing the process of decision-making constitutes another political challenge in South Korea.

In the process of democratic consolidation, South Korean political scientists have raised four issues. The first is concerned with what kind of democracy is needed, not whether democracy exists or not. Determining how to balance democratic governance and civic participation constitutes the core of this debate. Those who advocate the centrality of party politics suggest that civic movements should work through the political parties. On the other hand, those who advocate the centrality of participatory democracy focus more on the direct linkage between the citizen and the state.

The second issue concerns the new political cleavages in South Korea. Before democratic transition, pro-democracy and anti-democracy served as the main pillar of political cleavages in the country.³ However, after the democratic transition, regional cleavages developed as a new pillar of conflict.⁴ Later, class cleavages dominated, especially after the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997.⁵ In addition, value cleavage has surfaced as younger generations develop new political orientations. To put it briefly, political cleavages in South Korea have shifted from single dimensional to multi-dimensional. How these cleavages change the political dynamics in South Korea needs further scrutiny.

The third issue addresses the question of representing the political will of the electorate while maintaining the effective functioning of the legislative body. Some argue that parties should be restructured as intra-parliamentary parties that secure autonomy from the mass. Others argue that institutionalization of parties should occur in the form of a mass party that the electorate can identify and differentiate easily.

The fourth issue deals with reforming the governance structure itself. Regardless of regime type, there has long been a controversy about the imperial presidency in South Korea.⁶ In this regard, the desirability of a presidential system, a parliamentary system or a dual system has been discussed among South Korean political scientists. Some advocate introducing a parliamentary system, while others stress the futility of the debate by indicating misperceptions regarding the governance structure.

The five books reviewed here consider the abovementioned academic issues, each from a different angle.

Movement Politics or Party Politics

The civil movements that pioneered the struggle against an authoritarian regime are emblematic of South Korean democratic transition.⁷ Though these civil movement groups were functional in South Korea's transition to democracy, Jang Jip Choi contends that the constant effort on the part of movements to influence the political process has turned into a liability (Choi, 2008: 25). In 2002, South Korean politics witnessed massive anti-American demonstrations related to the killing of two schoolgirls by an American tank in August 2002. This movement was instrumental in the presidential victory of Roh. Again, from May to July 2008, candlelight demonstrations against the expected import of American beef over a period of 30 months under the South Korea-US FTA agreement led to the paralysis of decision-making under new president Myung Bak Lee.

Choi, Park and Park advocate the centrality of party politics as against movement politics. Choi suggests that the ideology and discourse shared by the movement activists are characterized by nostalgic nationalism, collective statism, and emotional radicalism (Choi, 2008: 30–3). In general, movement activists have a tendency to promote revolutionary change, relying on short-term, aggressive, and radical means. The anti-establishment orientation they share conflicts with the essence of party politics, which relies on slow, limited, and incomplete compromise (Choi, 2008: 38).

According to Choi et al. (2007: 26–30), there are three streams of thought that are fundamentally apolitical or even anti-political. One is a moralistic view of politics revealed by movement politics. It posits that the roles and actions of parties that represent only a fraction of social interests are negative and should therefore be minimized. Another is a view that the realm of politics should be minimized because democracy is not productive and effective from an economic standpoint. Market fundamentalism minimizes or marginalizes the value of politics, which results in the downsizing of democracy (Choi, 2008: 50–2). The final view is that direct participation of citizens and social movements can be an effective alternative to party politics. A moralistic understanding of politics, market-centeredness, and an emphasis on direct participation all promote anti-political and anti-party orientations.

Choi argues that both conservatives and liberals in South Korea share an anti-party orientation. Conservatives tend to think that a mass party based on socio-economic cleavages can be a threat to the maintenance of vested interests, while the pro-progressives consider the conservative parties corrupt and incompetent, failing to serve the cause of reform in the political arena (Choi et al., 2007: 136). Ironically, because of this antipathy toward political parties, the political space for movement activists expanded. Direct participation of the mass has not been discouraged. Also, direct participation can lead to the virtual monopoly of power by the state bureaucracy or large private enterprise (Choi et al., 2007: 33).

Most of all, the expansion of participation, especially in the form of populism, can result in a weakening of the mechanism of interest intermediation through political parties (Choi et al., 2007: 39). Instead of movement politics, Choi and colleagues argue that essential for the development of South Korean democracy is the development and institutionalization of political parties, the core of which involves forming alternative visions on the basis of the mobilization and representation of social interests and conflicts (Choi et al., 2007: 105). While they do not deny the importance of social movements, they argue that the energy of movements should

be converted to the institutionalization of political parties, since the expression of interests without the mediation of parties can result in an overrepresentation of the interests of the organized (Choi et al., 2007: 31). For the consolidation of democracy it is not healthy to be addicted to an overdose of direct democracy or non-representative democracy (Choi et al., 2007: 33). In short, there can be no consolidation of democracy without the consolidation of political parties (Choi et al., 2007: 105).

New Political Cleavages and Their Representation

After South Korea democratized in 1987, regionalism stood out as the main cleavage dividing the electorate. The so-called three Kims' period symbolized regionalism-based political cleavages. Dae Jung Kim represented the Cholla Province. Young Sam Kim represented the Gyongsang Province, while Jong Pil Kim represented the Chungchong Province. They left a negative legacy of frequently reshuffling, rather than consolidating, political parties.

Chung claims that, since the mid-1990s, South Korean politics have experienced a generational shift among the electorate. He argues that those who were born after the 1960s grew up in an affluent economic environment and were heavily exposed to rapidly changing information technology. Furthermore, young generation voters acquired more post-materialist values (Chung, 2008: 42).⁸ One of the reasons why the voting rate declined and floating voters increased, which Chung thinks contributed to the de-alignment from regional cleavages, was the effect of generational replacement (Chung, 2008: 77). Though Chung succeeds in showing the generational effect on the voting rate and the new political values shared among young voters, he fails to specify the mechanism by which political cleavages were converted into party competition. In other words, post-materialist values remain a source of newly emerging social cleavages; however, they have not yet been translated into a new form of party politics.

Unlike Chung, who focuses on the generational shift among South Korean voters, Choi concentrates more on the structure of party competition. According to him, the reason why conservative parties prevail in South Korea is not because of the ideological orientations among voters but because of a system that excludes any party representing labor and the low income classes (Choi, 2008: 101). For Choi, the biggest problem in South Korean democracy since democratization has been the failure to represent the interests of the socially weak within the political process (Choi, 2008: 6). Borrowing the concept of divisible and non-divisible conflict from Albert Hirshman,⁹ Choi asserts that issues related to nationalism, which are non-divisible, have been overpoliticized, while the labor issue, which is divisible, has been underpoliticized (Choi, 2008: 105). Underrepresented or excluded social sectors, like labor, have repeatedly relied on strikes, struggles, and demonstrations. As a solution to this, Choi suggests that realizing distributive justice by incorporating labor should stand at the center of institutionalizing party politics (Choi, 2008: 112).¹⁰ What Choi envisions is European-style party competition, where the conservatives and the progressives contend on the socio-economic issues. Unfortunately, however, like Chung, Choi does not specify how the new cleavages can be politically organized in the real world.

Young Tae Jung shares the hope for the emergence of a progressive party in South Korea, after critically analyzing the nation's labor market following the Asian economic crisis in 1997. Jung suggests that the labor regime in South Korea prior to 1987

can be characterized as a repressive corporatist regime, but around 1987 a hybrid system was established in which the Japanese corporate consensus model and the Anglo-American market economy model were mixed (Jung, 2005: 56–70). However, according to Jung, since the Asian economic crisis the Anglo-American style labor management system has been radically introduced and implemented by successive governments for the purpose of strengthening flexibility in the labor market. Examples of new practices are given (Jung, 2005: 73–7). Labor participation in management has become radically curtailed. The annual salary system is being rapidly replaced by a salary step system. The hiring of irregular workers is now widely accepted. All of these practices engender crisis consciousness on the part of organized labor, which increases the potential for the rise of a progressive political party. In addition to the changes in the labor market, Jung also highlights shifts in the ideological orientation among the electorate. Citing a number of opinion surveys, he finds that those who have liberal and progressive political orientations are steadily increasing (Jung, 2005: 169–79). Jung clearly bases his hope for the potential rise of a new progressive party in the Democratic Labor Party, which secured 10 seats in the general election of 2004. His analysis implies that the conditions are right for the growth of conservative–progressive cleavages centered on socioeconomic issues. However, two parties with progressive orientations, the Open Uri Party and the Democratic Labor Party, are competing with each other rather than consolidating into a positive alliance. According to Jung, because of the party split, liberal voters are fragmented and divided, which blurs the clarification of the cleavage (Jung, 2005: 256–7).

Despite differences on the possibility for the development of new political cleavages in South Korea, all agree that old cleavages are rapidly weakening, while new cleavages are gradually on the rise. However, new cleavages have not entirely substituted for the old cleavages, nor are they firmly represented by political parties. Still, it is fair to say that political cleavages have been pluralized.

Political Reform and Party Organization: Intra-parliamentary Party or Mass Party?

The authors reviewed in this article agree that party politics should be institutionalized to consolidate South Korean democracy. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that party politics are estranged from the aspirations of the electorate. However, as a way to change this distorted political practice, different political reform measures have been suggested.

Jin Min Chung is not alone in emphasizing the importance of institutionalizing party politics (Chung, 2008: 26). However, for him, party organizational reorientation is an integral part of institutionalizing party politics. Chung argues that a mass party model, which is based on the mobilization of mass membership, is inappropriate in a post-industrial and information society (Chung, 2008: 14). Instead of revitalizing a party on the ground, he maintains there are two ways of rejuvenating party politics. One is the introduction of a primary system and a voters' association at a local level, which he calls a voters' party.¹¹ He believes that establishing intra-party democracy is critical, since oligarchic party leaders have exerted predominant influence within the political parties, causing the electorate to turn away from them (Chung, 2008: 93). Hence, Chung supports

the ideas of abolishing the party president, the separation of the party and the executive, and the selection of candidates by open primaries. Another approach is to strengthen intra-parliamentary party in a way that enhances individual politicians' autonomous decision-making and voting within the legislative body (Chung, 2008: 101–5). Specifically, Chung suggests bringing cross-voting into the National Assembly, as well as strengthening the role of individual committees in reviewing laws and policies (Chung, 2008: 187–205).

As a counterargument against Chung, Choi et al. claim that arguments for an intra-parliamentary party contain a strong middle-class bias in that they would either exclude the organized representation of the socially disadvantaged or at least control collective conflicts or competition that may be accompanied by mass party organization (Choi et al., 2007: 142).¹² They also argue that an intra-parliamentary party gives too much influence to technocratic elites or specialists who make decisions without the intervention of the electorate (Choi et al., 2007: 145). Furthermore, unlike Chung, who focuses on the post-materialist values among young generations, they argue that a class-based hierarchical cleavage structure should be represented (Choi et al., 2007: 150–2). Unlike in Western societies where conflicts related to materialism have been attenuated with the advent of the welfare state, cleavages in industrial society, they argue, have not yet been meaningfully mobilized in South Korea (Choi et al., 2007: 264–5). Therefore, Choi et al. point out that class or strata-based cleavages have the potential to be actively mobilized, which can be facilitated by the organization of a mass party. As a result, they are against regulatory reform measures that try to bring in the concept of intra-parliamentary parties. The enforcement of such a regulatory framework has the danger of distorting the autonomous emergence and development of political parties in South Korea (Choi et al., 2007: 266–7).

To sum up, Chung favors the introduction of an American-style party democracy where the party in the electorate carries more weight, while Choi et al. prefer a European-style expansion of political ideological space with the expectation that a mass party organization representing class cleavages could develop. Also, while Choi et al. put an emphasis on competition among parties with different policy programs in order to realize a responsible government in times of election, Chung focuses on flexible and effective decision-making in order to realize a responsive government in non-election times.

Presidential System and beyond in South Korean Democracy

Regarding reform of the governance structure in South Korea, the presidential system itself lies at the center of controversy. The South Korean presidency has long been perceived as being too strong. Changing the presidential system to an alternative has been a frequent topic for constitutional revision.

Won Taek Kang introduces academic debates about the presidential and the parliamentary system to challenge the conventional wisdom widely shared among the general populace. Indeed, the South Korean media do not hesitate to describe the South Korean presidency as an imperial presidency (Kang, 2006: 32). However, Kang asserts that the presidential system was invented, especially in the United States, in order to prevent the emergence of strong, uncontrolled power (Kang, 2006: 44).¹³ After democratization, South Korean presidents faced several occasions where they could not push forward important political agendas. Rather than simply

looking at the problems in the institution itself, Kang focuses on the conflict between the president and the parliament to explain this dilemma. According to him, conflicts can be minimized when a unified government, which means that the party that produced the president secures a stable majority in the legislative body, prevails. On the other hand, conflicts between the president and the parliament are unavoidable when the government is divided in the sense that the ruling party lacks a majority in the legislative body (Kang, 2006: 60–2). American democracy can avoid political conflicts, even with a divided government, because of the existence of weakly disciplined political parties and the lack of ideological polarization between parties (Kang, 2006: 63–8). Hence, Kang attributes the origin of repeated political conflicts in South Korea not to the presidential system itself but to the existence of strongly disciplined parties, where the president is virtually the party leader, as well as to strong ideological polarization (Kang, 2006: 92).

Another misconception about the governance structure in South Korea is that the parliamentary system produces weak political leaders and is intrinsically unstable, since the parliamentary experiment in South Korea ended in failure during the early 1960s.¹⁴ Kang asserts that establishing a responsible party system is a crucial precondition for the success of the parliamentary system (Kang, 2006: 106–9). Unlike in the popular conception, a parliamentary system can avoid political instability with the fusion of power, as well as by flexibly changing political leaders when necessary (Kang, 2006: 157). Kang highlights two sources of political instability under the parliamentary system: one is the failure to secure a majority in the parliament and the second is a fragmented party system which makes the emergence of a stable coalition difficult (Kang, 2006: 160–3).

Overall, Kang gives more attention to the nature of the political party, the party system in terms of number and fragmentation, and the cleavage structure in society, than he does to the institutional governance systems themselves.

Chung also notes the possibility of a non-performing parliament under a unified government, as well as the ineffective functioning of the presidency under a divided government (Chung, 2008: 239–40). To avoid the situation where a divided government hampers efficient legislation, he claims that the autonomy of individual members in parliament should be guaranteed through the introduction of roll-call voting. Furthermore, Chung asserts that the parliamentary elements in the South Korean presidential system, such as the appointment of National Assembly members to cabinet posts, should be abolished (Chung, 2008: 240–51). This implies that, instead of introducing a new governance structure through constitutional change, medium-range institutional engineering is sufficient for sustaining effective governance in South Korea.

In all, Kang's view is not different from Choi's analysis that the problem of the governance structure in South Korea after democratization is based on the weak party system and a strong presidency without a stable political support basis (Choi, 2008: 126). Party politics should be institutionalized in a way that can bring about a stable majority in the legislative body through competition among plural parties. Also, both agree that politically unmediated interests have the potential to develop into uncontrolled social movements that can disrupt political stability. On the other hand, Chung finds a solution in weakening party discipline and giving more autonomy to individual legislative members, which enhances the possibility of better interaction between the president and the legislative body.

A South Korean Model of Democratic Consolidation?

All the authors reviewed in this article emphasize the centrality of party politics in consolidating democracy in South Korea. They advocate, in one form or another, the introduction of either American-style or European-style party politics onto South Korean soil. However, the principal challenge for South Korean democracy is whether the government can create a South Korean version of consolidated democracy, which may be different from party politics in other advanced democratic countries.

In terms of emphasizing party politics as a central feature of democratic consolidation, the authors reviewed do not conceal their conservative bias in believing that the participatory orientation of civil groups should be channeled through political parties. However, one of the distinctive characteristics of South Korean democracy is active civic participation that challenges the establishment. For the sound working of democracy, active participation should be encouraged, for it is indeed better than non-participation or lack of interest in politics. Thus, party politics and civic engagement should not be understood as standing on opposite poles. Civil society groups are encouraged to voice their opinions through legitimized channels of interest intermediation, while political parties play a mediating role to accommodate their demands. South Korean democracy can be a good testing ground to see whether party politics and civil society can create synergy for democratic consolidation.

Finally, each of the authors points out the fragility of party politics in South Korea. They express concerns over the frequent reshuffling of political parties. However, they neglect the fact that the Grand National Party has maintained its party identity for more than 12 years since its formation in 1997, representing a conservative pole of Korean society. Parties needing more institutionalization may be those belonging to the progressive camp. In this regard, the authors correctly point out the imperative of representing the socially weak and the labor groups. The challenge for the progressive camp is to present itself as a viable political alternative to the conservatives in Korea. If that happens, Korean party politics have a fair chance of seeing the development of a well-represented conservative–progressive cleavage, encompassing a socioeconomic dimension.

Notes

1. For the minimalist definition of democracy, see Adam Przeworski (1999).
2. For the role of civil movements in democratic transition, see Sun Hyuk Kim (2000).
3. Choi (1993) traces the development of political cleavages in Korea over the past several decades.
4. The so-called three Kims – Young Sam Kim, Dae Jung Kim, and Jong Pil Kim – actively manipulated regional sentiments in the presidential campaigns.
5. The election of the Democratic Labor Party members in the general election of 2000 attests to this.
6. Arthur Schlesinger was the first to use the term “imperial presidency” in Schlesinger (1973).
7. Regarding the role of civil society in Korean democratization, see Kim (2000).
8. Chung takes Ronald Inglehart’s study on post-materialism and applies the concept to Korea. See Inglehart (1990).
9. Albert Hirschman, “Social Conflicts as Pillars of Democratic Market Societies,” in Albert Hirschman (1995).

10. In this sense, he is interested in strengthening the social basis of democracy.
11. Jin Min Chung cites Peter Mair's concept of party in the electorate to elaborate his conception. See Peter Mair (1993).
12. Borrowing Duverger's concept, they claim that it is an attempt to avoid contagion from the left. Maurice Duverger (1964: 426).
13. Kang refers to work done by Mainwaring (1992) and Linz and Valenzuela (1994) to discuss the failure of the presidential system.
14. For the failure of the parliamentary system in Korea, see Han (1974).

References

- Choi, Jang Jip (1993). "Political Cleavages in South Korea," in Hagen Koo (ed.), *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Duverger, Maurice (1964). *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State*. London: Methuen.
- Han, Sungjoo (1974). *The Failure of Democracy in South Korea*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hirshman, Albert (1995). *A Property to Self-Subversion*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Inglehart, Ronald (1990). *Cultural Shift in Advanced Industrial Societies*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Kim, Sun Hyuk (2000). *The Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Linz, Juan and Arturo Valenzuela, eds (1994). *The Failure of Presidential Democracy*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Mainwaring, Scott (1992). "Presidentialism in Latin America," in A. Lijphart (ed.), *Parliamentary versus Presidential Government*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mair, Peter (1993). *How Parties Organize*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Przeworski, Adam (1999). "Minimalist Conception of Democracy: A Defense," in Ian Shapiro and Casiano Hacker-Cordon (eds), *Democracy's Value*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Schlesinger Jr, Arthur (1973). *The Imperial Presidency*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Biographical Note

CHEOL HEE PARK is an Associate Professor, Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, whose research interests include contemporary Japanese politics, comparative analysis of South Korean and Japanese politics, South Korea–Japan relations, and international relations in East Asia. ADDRESS: Graduate School of International Studies, Seoul National University, South Korea [email: chpark82@snu.ac.kr].