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SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN POLAND AND SOUTH KOREA IN THE LATE 1980S

ABSTRACT

This study aims to compare the democratization process in Poland and South Korea in the late 1980s. Despite their distant geographical and cultural location, the two countries happen to share many similarities regarding their recent history and geopolitics. For this reason, it is beneficial to compare the two in order to find out the main conditions and factors, which contributed to democratic transition in both of them. The study focuses on the ideas of democracy, democratization, and transplacement as the main concepts that define the democratization process in Poland and South Korea. Through the comparison, we find out that there are many more similarities than differences between the two. We also learn that both economic stagnation and economic prosperity can similarly contribute to forcing authoritarian governments to democratize, yet the same economic factors also very often determine the final results of the process.

Keywords: Poland, South Korea, democratization, democratic transition, democratic consolidation, transplacement, negotiations

INTRODUCTION¹

Poland and South Korea are commonly classified as part of the so called 'third wave' of democratization,² where both of them went through a process of political liberalization and democratization in the late 1980s. Before that, after World War II, Poland was forced to become a one-party communist state in the Soviet sphere of influence, with its economy transformed from pre-war capitalism to a Soviet-style, centrally-planned economic system, and the political scene dominated by a single communist party with no legal opposition. In other words, the country became a satellite state of the USSR, and the Polish people had to struggle with the oppressive, non-democratic government for nearly 45 years until the late 1980s, when pro-democratic protests accelerated by economic stagnation pushed the government for negotiations with the opposition, which at that time was still delegalized.

Similarly, the Republic of Korea, established in 1948 in the southern part of the Korean Peninsula in opposition to the Democratic People's Republic of Korea in the north, from the very beginning was located in the American sphere of influence, with its state ideology becoming anti-communism and capitalism. Since then, for more than four decades, the country has been ruled in an authoritarian manner by both civilian and military leaders, who have not hesitated to use force in order to maintain their power and suppress the general population. It was only in the mid-to-late 1980s when pro-democratic opposition with mass pro-democratic protests forced the government to consider implementing reforms aimed at liberalizing the political system.³

This study aims to compare the democratization processes that took place in Poland and South Korea in the 1980s with a focus on the most important conditions and factors which played critical roles. Additionally, we try to find out the similarities and differences between the two seemingly distant and unrelated countries. There exists a large number of studies focusing on the democratic transformation in Poland, oftentimes comparing it to similar processes in other Central and Eastern European countries.⁴ The same is true for South Korea, whose democratization has been studied thoroughly by various researchers, frequently with comparison to other Asian

¹ The transliteration used here follows the Revised Romanization of Korean system (2000), officially introduced by the National Academy of the Korean Language (NAKL) and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. In exceptional cases, the spelling adopted by the Korean authors themselves has been used. Korean names are presented following traditional convention, with the family name preceding the given name.

² L. Diamond, M.F. Plattner, Chu Yun-Han. et al. (eds.), *Consolidating the Third Wave Democracies: Regional Challenges*, Baltimore 1997, pp. xiii-xiv.

³ Seong Gyeongryung, *Political Sociology of Regime Change Korean Politics*, Seoul 1995, p. 448.; Doh Chull Shin, *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*, Cambridge 1999, p. 15.

⁴ Yoon Deokhui, "Pollandeuwa Heonggari gachyeokui uimiwa sahoejuui hyangbang," (The Meaning of Reforms and the Future Direction of Socialism in Poland and Hungary) *Journal of Korean Social Trend and Perspective*, vol. 6 (1989); S. Saxonberg, "Regime Behavior in 1989 – A Comparison of Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Hungary, and Poland," *Problems of Post-communism*, vol. 47, no. 4 (2000).

countries, such as Taiwan⁵ or Thailand.⁶ However, with a few exceptions,⁷ there are still not many studies which compare and contrast the two countries directly. This is despite the fact that the process of democratization which took place in the two countries can actually be considered quite alike. In other words, we can say that such a comparison may be useful as a case study in order to determine the conditions and factors that are required for successful democratic transitions in authoritarian states.

DEFINING THE CONCEPTS OF DEMOCRATIZATION AND TRANSPLACEMENT

Before analyzing the process of democratization, we need to establish the definition of *democracy* itself. In this paper, we use the minimalist concept of democracy, i.e. we can define it as *a system in which governmental offices are filled through competitive, multi-party elections that place incumbents at real risk of defeat*.⁸ The reason for calling this concept 'minimalist' is due to it focusing solely on the fact of organizing democratic elections, with less focus on what happens after the elections. However, when it comes to transitioning from authoritarianism to democracy, democratic elections are in fact the first goal and prerequisite for further democratization, hence this minimalist concept of democracy is commonly used in existing democratization studies.⁹

Having defined democracy, we can move on to the concept of democratization itself. In fact, democratization is actually comprised of two stages – a transition from a non-democratic regime into a democratic regime, and consolidation of the newly democratized regime. The two stages are interconnected and interrelated, with democratic consolidation requiring democratic transition to happen first.¹⁰ Moreover, democratization is a *finality-driven political process*,¹¹ where the goal is always to form a system of democratic government.¹² This means that limited reforms that only provide the citi-

⁵ Masahiro Wakabayashi, "Democratization of the Taiwanese and Korean Political Regimes: A Comparative Study," *Developing Economies*, vol. 35, no. 4 (1997).; J.K. Jung, "Popular Mobilization and Democratization: A Comparative Study of South Korea and Taiwan," *Korea Observer*, vol. 42, no. 3 (2011).

⁶ Lee Dong-Yoon., Lee Jaehyon, "Political Crises After Democratization in South Korea and Thailand: Comparative Perspectives of Democratic Consolidation," *Korea Observer*, vol. 39 (2008).

⁷ S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*, Norman 1991; K. Kozłowski, K. Stüwe (eds), *The Korean Peninsula: Unification Trajectories: Insights from Poland to Germany*, Warsaw 2017; Lim Jie-Hyun, *Global Easts: Remembering, Imagining, Mobilizing*, New York 2022.

⁸ L. Diamond, *Developing Democracy: Towards Consolidation*, Baltimore 1999, p. 37.

⁹ A. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge–New York 1991, pp. 10-11.

¹⁰ R.A. Dahl, *On Democracy*, New Haven 1998, pp. 98-99.

¹¹ J. Pribán, "Varieties of Transition from Authoritarianism to Democracy," *Annual Review of Law and Social Science*, vol. 8 (2012), p. 106.

¹² A. Schedler, "What is democratic consolidation?," *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1998), p. 95.

zens with some form of influence on the government without actually democratizing the political scene cannot be called democratization.¹³ Furthermore, there is no guarantee that every democratization process will actually lead to successful democratic transition or democratic consolidation.¹⁴

Lastly, we can distinguish between three types of democratic transitions, i.e. transformation, replacement, and transplacement. Transformation means a process where the authoritarian government itself makes a shift to democracy. Replacement refers to a situation in which the authoritarian regime is either overthrown or collapses, and the democratic opposition seizes power instead. The last one, i.e. transplacement, achieves democratization through a complex process of 'adjustment, repression, and negotiation' between the ruling authoritarian elites and the democratic opposition, through which the two groups cooperate with one another.¹⁵ It is important to note that some types of regimes are more prone to democratize in one way than another. Specifically, nearly all military and communist dictatorships that decided to democratize went through either transformations or transplacements. This is because the two types of democratization often allow the authoritarian leaders to secure so-called 'exit guarantees', which protect them from punishment, prosecution or retaliation after the democratization. Both Poland and South Korea are prime examples of democratization via transplacement.¹⁶

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DEMOCRATIZATION IN POLAND AND SOUTH KOREA

When it comes to post-World War II history, we can say that Poland and South Korea share many similarities with each other. Although distant in terms of geography and culture, the two countries were forcefully placed under the influence of the Soviet Union and the United States respectively, which during the Cold War either dictated or heavily influenced their political and economic system. The Republic of Korea was an authoritarian state with a capitalist economy that was ruled between 1948 and 1988 by multiple civilian and military dictatorships, where *capitalists (...) thrived as a subsidiary partner to the authoritarian developmental state*.¹⁷ On other hand, Poland between 1945 and 1989 was a one-party communist dictatorship with a planned economy. Furthermore, historical conditions, such as the fact that both Poland and South Korea regained independence after being occupied by their neighbors, which were Germany

¹³ These kind of reforms are usually called *liberalisation*, which is a very different and much narrower concept than actual *democratisation* (J.J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation: Southern Europe, South America, and Post-communist Europe*, Baltimore 1996, p. 3).

¹⁴ J. Dryzek, L. Holmes, *Post-communist Democratization: Political Discourses Across Thirteen Countries*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 7-8.

¹⁵ J.J. Linz, A. Stepan, *Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation...*, p. 322.

¹⁶ S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave...*, p. 151.

¹⁷ Kim Sunhyuk, *The Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society*, Pittsburgh 2000, pp. 54-55.

and the USSR in the former, and Japan in the latter, and the fact that they both were under the influence of one of the world superpowers and its ideology, led to a situation where the systems of government and economy were also imposed upon them by force. For this reason, the authoritarian regimes in both countries lacked actual legitimacy stemming from the people's democratic selections. In other words, we can say that even though the actual political and economic systems in Poland and South Korea were very different, the conditions and factors that led to them were quite alike.

Because of the above, both countries had to rely on their ideology in order to increase the government's legitimacy and justify the oppression, i.e. ideology was central in determining the character of the state. In the case of South Korea, the ideology was anti-communism and capitalism, while in Poland, it was communism and planned economy. Any ideologies or ideas that opposed the above were either banned or even actively persecuted. Moreover, the permanent threat of an arch-enemy, i.e. the Western Europe and the United States in the case of Poland, and North Korea, China, and the USSR in the case of South Korea, was also used by the regimes in order to oppress the political opposition and invigilate the population. As such, although the ideologies and the arch-enemies themselves were very different in both cases, the way they were utilized by the authoritarian governments to legitimate their non-democratic rule and maintain control over the population were very much the same.

When it comes to the democratization process that took place in Poland and South Korea in the late 1980s, we can conclude that in both cases it was a negotiated transition in the form of transplacement.¹⁸ This means that in both Poland and South Korea there was neither a sudden collapse of the regime nor was the regime itself the main actor that introduced and led the democratization. On the contrary, in both cases it was a long process of negotiations between the ruling party and the pro-democratic opposition. In addition, the opposition in South Korea was growing stronger and stronger, posing a threat to the government, which eventually pushed the authoritarian leaders to concessions and liberalization of the system. Furthermore, the economic situation in both countries can be considered one of the main factors that contributed to the democratization. In the case of Poland, it was the economic stagnation that caused the general population to lose all hope in the communist ideology, demanding changes from the government, whose legitimacy was already severely weakened.¹⁹ On the other hand, the economic situation of South Korea in the 1980s was completely the opposite, with very high economic growth and constant development. Yet, the Korean middle class, previously non-existent but created during the economic boom, grew more and more dissatisfied with the authoritarian regime, wanting more political freedom instead, which put great pressure on the government and forced it to negotiations with the pro-democratic opposition.²⁰

¹⁸ S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave...*, p. 151; A. Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market...*, p. 94; Heo Uk, "The Third Wave of Democratization and Economic Performance in Asia: Theory and Application," *Korea Observer*, vol. 43, no. 1 (2012), p. 10.

¹⁹ S.P. Huntington, *The Third Wave...*, pp. 53-54.

²⁰ Heo Uk, "The Third Wave of Democratization...", pp. 10, 12.

In sum, we can name three main factors that contributed to the democratic transformation both in Poland and South Korea. Firstly, in the two countries the process began when the government decided to negotiate with the opposition with the aim of introducing limited economic reforms in order to strengthen its legitimacy and gain more support from the population for its authoritarian rule. Yet in both cases the pro-democratic opposition was unwilling to follow the government's dictation, actively using the newly opened political space to push its own agenda, for which the regimes were unprepared. By the end, the scale of opposition-led protests was so large that the ruling parties were forced to comply with their demands. Secondly, there was a balance between hard-liners and reforms inside the governments and parties, which prevented them from trying to use pure force to suppress the democratic protests. In both cases, the leadership was simply afraid of losing power without securing guarantees for themselves. At the same time, the opposition in both countries was also led by moderate figures, who preferred to utilize peaceful means to put pressure on the regime rather than trying to overthrow it by force. The authoritarian leaders were also keener to negotiate with the moderates rather than with unpredictable radicals. Thirdly, the authoritarian leaders, who were ruling the countries at that time, both had military background, which allowed them to act more independently, relying not only on the party but also on the military to protect them from punishment and prosecution for their past actions. As such, they were more willing to negotiate their own step down without being afraid of possible consequences.

When comparing similarities between the democratization process in the countries, we concluded that in both of them it was fueled by the economic situation, and also that it took a form of transplacement, in which the authoritarian governments were forced to negotiate with the pro-democratic opposition. However, despite the fact the process itself can be said to have been similar in both cases, the participating opposition groups and the outcomes were considerably different. On one hand, in Poland, the communist government failed to secure its power after the democratization, leading to a collapse of the communist party itself and a complete reorganization of the political and economic system. On the other hand, in South Korea, the military elites were able to remain in full control over the democratic transition, leading to a situation where they managed to stay in power, even winning the first democratic presidential elections. Another difference was the fact that in Poland, the main group responsible for pro-democratic protests were laborers, while in South Korea, the main group were university students. Yet, such differences did not significantly influence the process of democratization through transplacement itself.

CONCLUSION

In the study, we use the concepts of democracy, democratization, and transplacement in order to analyze, compare, and contrast the process of transformation from authoritarianism to democracy, which took place in Poland and South Korea in the late 1980s. We

purposefully rely on the minimalist definition of democracy in order to focus on democratic transition, which is the first and required stage of democratization. Furthermore, we define the transition in Poland and South Korea as transplacement, whereby democratization occurred in a process of negotiations between the government and the opposition.

We can conclude that factors, such as the historical circumstances, the political situations, and the economic conditions had similar influence on democratization in both regimes. Yet, there were differences when it comes to the final outcome of the process. In Poland, the communist party failed to predict the final result of the democratic transition, which ended up being a victory of the democratic opposition. In the case of South Korea, the authoritarian government remained in control of the whole process. One of the primary factors that allowed the military government in South Korea to remain in control was the economic situation. Compared to the pro-democratic opposition, the government was in a favorable position, and it also had the means to become the leading force of the democratic transition. The same was impossible in Poland, where severe economic stagnation stripped the government of any capabilities to suppress the opposition.

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