

**IS THERE A DEVELOPMENTAL THRESHOLD
FOR DEMOCRACY?
Endogenous factors in the democratization of South
Korea**

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Abstract

Democracy as an advanced form of politics is not independent from socio-economic development. This paper examines the developmental threshold for democracy, namely a point in the development process beyond which democracy can be effectively installed and sustained. Based on the two research trends on the issue, a framework of democratic transformation is proposed where two essential factors of *social structure* and *political culture* define such a threshold. Modernization and industrialization dramatically change the power balance in the society through creating new classes in support of democratic transition. Their attitudes and preferences undermine the traditional agrarian relationships and generate a new set of political values and orientations that usher in democracy. When the pro-democratic force begins to dominate in number, political transformation will take place. To illustrate this, South Korea's democratization is studied in some detail. In addition, using the concept of the *threshold of criticality*, an attempt is made to identify the timing of such a threshold. However, collaboration between sociologists and political scientists is needed before such prediction can be made more precise.

INTRODUCTION

Is there a developmental threshold for democracy? And if there is such a threshold, what is it made of?

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a threshold is defined to be “a level, point, or value above which something is true or will take place and below which it is not or will not”. A developmental threshold for democracy is a point in the development process when conditions are ripe for democracy to be installed and sustained. Those conditions include economic, social and cultural changes brought about by modernization.

Why is it significant to find out whether a developmental threshold for democracy exists or not? An investigation into the matter will provide an answer for one important debate between aid donors and some developing countries. The former insist on democratic reforms as conditions for aid while the latter argue that democracy does not function well in their underdeveloped societies and may even hinder development. In addition, a thorough understanding of the causal relationship between development and democracy is helpful if one wishes to advance the cause of democracy. Once the mechanism of democratic transition is understood, it may become possible to inject some appropriate catalysts to accelerate it.

To examine such a threshold, it is worthwhile to begin with a brief review of democracy to see whether it can be independent of development or not. That is to say, whether or not we can install and sustain democracy in a society regardless of its level of economic development. If not, there may be one point in the development process below which the society does not support democracy while, above that, there are factors favorable for democratization. Determining that threshold and identifying its factors are the purpose of this paper.

The study is divided into two main parts: the first part is devoted to finding an answer for the question of a developmental threshold for democracy; while the second part is an illustration of endogenous factors for democratization in the development process in South Korea. South Korea is not the only country that points to the existence of the threshold for democracy but it is perhaps the most prominent of all. The country's experience with development and democracy is fascinating because all happened in a considerably short span of time during which the conflicts and changes in the society were clearly discernable.

PART I

IS THERE A DEVELOPMENTAL THRESHOLD FOR DEMOCRACY?

There are two tasks assigned to this part: the first is to examine whether and how democracy is dependent on development; and the second involves an investigation into the components and timing of the developmental threshold for democracy.

1. Is democracy an independent variable?

I will start my investigation with a developmental orthodoxy widely held among Western official circles that has served as a theoretical basis for aid program. According to Leftwich (1996:4), in this thought, democracy is not an outcome or consequence but a necessary condition for development. Proponents of this strand argue that democratically elected governments are more accountable, less corrupt, and hence more efficient developmentally, for they are judged by their performance and thrown out if they did not deliver promised public goods effectively. In other words, democracy promotes *good governance* that is essential for the effective use of resources and hence sustainable development. The orthodox view thus requires democracy to be installed and maintained in any stage of development in any society. In fact, such position has been adopted by many Western governments and also built into the conditionality imposed by aid organizations. This tendency can be seen clearly in, for example, the British aid policy. The country's overseas development minister Lynda Chalker writes:

A major new thrust of our policy is to promote pluralistic systems which work for and respond to individuals in society. In political terms this means democracy... And we firmly believe that democratic reforms are necessary in many countries for broad based sustainable development (as quoted by Leftwich 1996:16).

While the exact definition of the term 'democracy' or 'democratic reforms' is seldom specified by Western donors, it could be understood from their list of conditions for aid that, by *democracy*, they mean a multiparty system and periodical free and fair elections, together with freedom of press and the protections of human rights. In short, Britain and other developed countries are committed to the setting up in the Third World a liberal representative system more or less the same as those functioning in the West, regardless of the level of development or the distinctive features of the recipient societies.

But democracy cannot be taken on its face value as such. For example, open, free and fair elections are considered essential but they cannot guarantee that the most capable people ascend to the leadership. It is difficult to campaign for elections if you are not rich and have few connections. It is estimated that in the United States – popularly seen as a bastion of liberal democracy – the average Senate race requires an expenditure of \$3.9 million, and some candidates have spent upwards of \$25 million on a single contest¹. Competition is thus open but mostly for the rich and the privileged. This is why liberal

¹ Rachel's Environment & Health Weekly #427 : 'Big-picture organizing--part 7: getting money out of politics' <http://www.monitor.net/rachel/r427.html>: 1.00 am, 31/8/03.

democratic rules bring about different results especially in countries where the problem of severe inequality exists. The Philippines is sometimes called an *oligarchic democracy* where governmental power seldom gets out of the elite circle.

Limited competition in another sense is witnessed in many other East European countries, where different parties have more or less similar campaigning programs and, once elected, they pursue basically the same policies for years. What is the point in choosing among candidates who do not differ in their plan of action? And after the election, how can the electorate make sure that their representatives keep their campaigning promises?

Liberal democratic rules may sound decent but they often do not work well in reality, especially in the Third World. As Huntington observes, a democratic wave at the end of World War II impacted many countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. But while the Europeans stuck to the new political system, democracy could not take hold firmly in African, Latin American and many Asian countries (Huntington 1991:19). Political changes only brought instability and sustained underdevelopment to them. From 1962, a reverse wave was witnessed with a shift toward authoritarianism.

Clearly, not every society supports democracy. For example, a full functioning of democracy is difficult in Thailand where the majority of the population lives in the rural area and money politics is common. Though the Thais have a multi-party system and they hold elections periodically, Duncan McCargo observes that Thailand has suffered from serious failures of political leadership (Duncan McCargo 2002: 6). The problem is that 80% of all Thai constituencies were dominated by the rural vote and in the provinces. Thai voters are under great pressure from provincial bosses who provide jobs and protection. Therefore, they would vote not for their belief in the capability of the candidates but for their patrons. Thailand is just one example of societies in which democracy has not been able to strike root and instead has degenerated into something else.

Theoretically, democracy is impossible to support without an appropriate class structure in the society. Leftwich (1996:6) argues that democracy is, in fact, a form of politics but not “a bunch of institutional arrangements and rules”. By politics, he means *all the activities of conflict, cooperation and negotiation involved in the use, production and distribution of resources, whether material or ideal, whether at local, national or international levels, or whether in the private or public domains*. Democracy requires that all political decisions are made with the participation of different social groups and that these decisions must reflect the aspirations of the majority of the society. Bearing such a feature, democracy can be supported only in certain societies where there are more or less equally powerful social groups and where compromising is considered a common practice. In other words, democracy is a dependent variable whose survival hinges on the character and the capacity of the state. One does not need to be a Marxist to accept that each type of state appears in a certain cluster of socio-economic relations only and it has an instinctive tendency to reproduce the relations that allow its existence. This explains why democracy cannot take root in any society at any point of its development. Such a form of politics needs a certain platform of economic and social development on which it can be sustained. In the next section I will examine how development creates conditions necessary for democracy.

2. How does development facilitate democracy?

Correlation between the level of development and the chance to have democracy has long been thought to be positive. However, there remain the tasks of proving it and describing the mechanism in which development facilitates democratization.

2.1 Alternative approaches

Comparative analysis offers two main approaches to the matter: the first uses cross-national quantitative method in which correlation between development and democracy is established through statistical procedure; and the second examines cross-national historical experiences to distill the sequential relations between the pair. Each has its merits and demerits.

The quantitative tradition constructs a scale to determine the degree of a country's democratic achievements. Quantitative researchers use different developmental and democratic indices and use cross-national statistical data to establish the relation between them. This method is similar to the one used by natural scientists: conditions and results of interaction are recorded in numerous experiments to see how the two are related. Many political scientists take this path, regarding it as the only viable way to arrive at a universal correlation between development and democracy.

Seymour Martin Lipset is a pioneer in this tradition. In his famous essay 'Economic Development and Democracy', Lipset compares five indices of economic development in different types of countries: stable democracies, unstable democracies, and dictatorships. Lipset concludes: 'the more well-to-do a nation, the greater the chances that it will sustain democracy' (Lipset 1960:31). The same result is found in the works of other authors such as Phillips Cutright (1963) and Ken Bollen (1979). Although various measurements and comparison schemes are employed, these studies show a consistent positive relation between the level of development (both economical and social) and possibilities of democracy.

A more difficult task is to explain how increasing affluence affects the chance for political democracy. Clearly, establishing a correlation is not the same thing as proving that democracy is caused by socio-economic development. Lipset (1960) has several suggestions that feature moderation and tolerance. In his view, economic development and widespread higher education 'presumably broadens man's outlook, enables him to understand the need for norms of tolerance, restrains him from adhering to extremist doctrines and increases his capacity to make rational electoral choices' (ibid:39). To put it differently, prosperity and higher education moderate people and increase their political capability. Beside this, socioeconomic development can also strengthen the middle class in a society; 'a large middle class' is apparently good for democracy.

Cutright (1963) tries to explain the correlation through the concepts of complexity and equilibrium. In his opinion, national societies are systems with strong equilibrium tendencies. Greater division of labor and structural differentiation in economy and society demand more complex and specialized political institutions, if the system as a whole is to

be in equilibrium. Representative democracy is the sufficiently complex form of government to deal with such a social order².

The conclusions of quantitative authors are by no means satisfactory. Quantitative researchers do touch a bit on the political culture which, as we will see later, is important but not decisive in the democratization. One important thing is missing in their checklist for society's evolution. Economic growth and social and cultural changes do not have a simple linear impact on the political system. The sequence is subtler and more complicated which involves a shift in the power structure of the entire society before such changes could bring about a transformation at top level, in the realm of politics. Lacking a structural base, quantitative researchers can only provide descriptive guess on why and how development facilitates democracy. They also face difficulties in explaining universality in their finding, that is to say, why societies arrive at the same destination despite having taken different historical routes. This is indeed the most serious drawback in cross-national quantitative studies.

Qualitative historical scholars adopt a different research strategy. They focus on long-term processes of historical change and discuss cases of democratization at length. In this way, qualitative scientists can describe more fully political sequence and its relations with the surrounding structural conditions.

Karl de Schweinitz is among the earliest contributors in this tradition. In his 'Industrialization And Democracy: Economic Necessities' (1964), his attention is given to the conditions of democratization such as international development environment, the strength and character of state, the activeness of the working class, and examining how those factors have facilitated democracy in the West. Barrington Moore, Jr. offers a more structural approach. Comparing development experiences of eight countries – England, France, United States, Japan, India, China, Russia and Germany – Moore (1966:430-1) finds that different political routes that these countries took were determined by their own structural conditions, namely the relative class balance of power and the state. He then arrives at five general conditions for democratic development: (1) the development of a balance to avoid too strong a state or too independent a landed aristocracy; (2) a turn towards an appropriate form of commercial aristocracy; (3) the weakening of the landed aristocracy; (4) the prevention of an aristocratic-bourgeois coalition against peasants and workers; and (5) a revolutionary break from the past led by the bourgeoisie. Unfortunately, these conditions are bound up with the historical constellation of early capitalism. Thus, Moore ends his study with the conclusion that the process that ushered in capitalist democracy was 'itself a part of history which almost certainly will not be repeated' (Moore 1966:5). Moore's skepticism is shared by other qualitative scientists who think the Euro-American route to democracy is closed. And the prospect for new democracies looks dim.

Though the analyses provided by qualitative authors are convincing and well grounded empirically, their conclusions do not seem to please the critics. It will be useful if qualitative researchers go beyond their preoccupations with historical particularity to reach theoretical generalization. This is what Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1993:4) propose. They suggest that qualitative scientists use their structural approach to

² Quoted by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1992:15.

explain the positive correlation between democracy and development frequently found in quantitative studies. Such combination promises to help decode the ‘black box’ containing causality that runs from development to political democratic opening.

2.2 Pro-democratic alliance

As mentioned above, democracy is a form of politics. As such, it can only function with an appropriate socioeconomic base (*infrastructure*). What kind of social base does democracy require? And what changes brought about by development satisfy those requisites?

Among the many virtues that man attaches to democracy, two are most essential: (1) the rule of the many and (2) the efficiency. The rule of the many distinguishes democracy from other forms of political organization. As Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1993:41) remark, however we define democracy, it means nothing if it does not entail rule or participation in rule by the many. The rule of the many requires the popular participation (direct or indirect) into the decision-making process to ensure that the interests of the majority of the population are reflected in final political results. Secondly, democracy must be efficient. It must prove itself to be more competent than other forms of politics in using the resources so as to be chosen. For however ideal it may look, if democracy cannot ensure the continued development of individual and the whole society, it has to be substituted by another which is more efficient.

To make sure that democracy has the two important features, we need first of all a pluralist social structure in which the pro-democratic force is dominant. Pluralism means the existence of different interest groups in the society. This is needed as the background against which competition and compromising, the two procedural rules adored by democrats, operate. These rules enable us to choose the best people for every job and the best solution for each problem. Also, they permit the peaceful solutions for social conflicts.

It is a subtler task to determine the constituents of the pro-democratic force. In his celebrated work of *The social origins of dictatorship and democracy*, Barrington Moore provides a valuable research on postures of different classes towards democracy. Moore focuses his attention on the role of the bourgeoisie that he asserts is decisive in democratization: ‘no bourgeoisie, no democracy’ (Moore 1966:418). Many political scientists agree with Moore, confirming that the bourgeoisie, by nature, suit democracy. In modern times, however, as almost all countries in the world have adopted capitalism, the bourgeoisie lose their revolutionary role to the new middle class, comprising of mid-echelon managers, professionals, white-collar workers, etc.

While a consensus is easily reached on the role of the middle social stratum in promoting democratization, opinions on the role of the working class vary. Earlier authors either remained cautious on the matter or simply did not mention the issue at all. Little discussion on the workers can be seen in Moore’s works. De Schweinitz even thinks an active working class reduces the chances for democracy (quoted by Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens 1993:20). However, recent studies in democratization show that in new industrialized societies, the middle class is born late, remains small in demographic size and often keeps a low political profile. In many cases, this class even

allies implicitly with the ruling bloc to oppress the democratic movement of lower classes.

Meanwhile, the presence of modern workers is felt increasingly strong. The working class grows fast in size, political awareness and organization. Evidence shows that no political transformation is possible nowadays without the participation of workers. In many recent cases of democratization, the working class constitutes the core of the pro-democratic alliance. For that reason, in several recent studies of democracy, the role of workers has been taken more seriously. Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1993:59) even think that the working class is the most consistently pro-democratic force. Clearly, modernization causes structural changes in the society that facilitate democracy. Industrialization attracts people into factories who will then be part of a working class. Economic prosperity that follows also enlarges and empowers the middle class and the alliance of these two social strata makes the democratic force stronger, pressuring the conservatives to open up the political system.

2.3 Affirming tolerance and compromise

Another change that follows modernization, emphasized by many scholars as important for democratization, is the birth of a new political culture. As argued above, for democracy to function well, popular participation is necessary. Democratic politics also needs a new culture in which fair competition and mutual tolerance are routinely practiced. This requisite is met gradually in the development process. Lipset (1960) remarks rightly that prosperity makes people more tolerant and they tend to choose peaceful solution to conflicts. Education and media exposure are also acknowledged as beneficial for democracy as they improve the popular understanding of the political system and provide the people with opportunities to voice their stance in political issues.

In the article published in 1961, Deutsch gives interesting insights into social mobilization³ and its impact on political transformation. He observes that the social reordering in modernization, for example urbanization, makes it easier for people to accept new things. New living environment also requires different outlooks and patterns of behaviors. In short, in the process of modernization, clusters of old social, economic and psychological commitments are eroded or broken and people are inducted into some relatively stable new patterns of group membership, organization and commitment. Another result of this process is the rise of a new civil society. Civil society, as defined by Gordon White (1996: 182), is *an intermediate associational realm between state and family populated by organizations which are separate from the state, enjoy autonomy in relation to the state and are formed voluntarily by members of the society to protect or advance their interests or values*. Such social phenomenon has several implications. Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1993:50) observe that a dense civil society facilitates the political inclusion of the middle classes and, in some cases, this may be decisive for democratic breakthrough. Civil society is important for democracy on its own because it establishes a counterweight to state power.

³ 'Social mobilization is a name given to an overall process of change which happens to substantial parts of the population in countries which are moving from traditional to modern ways of life' (Karl W. Deutsch 1961:493).

In short, economic development yields two by-products that are directly relevant to democratic transition: change in the *social structure* and change in the *political culture*. These are the two variables that comprise the developmental threshold for democracy in which this study is interested. Figure 1 below sums up our ideas on how development leads to democracy. In the next section, let us examine these two variables in turn and see if we can detect the timing of democratic transition.

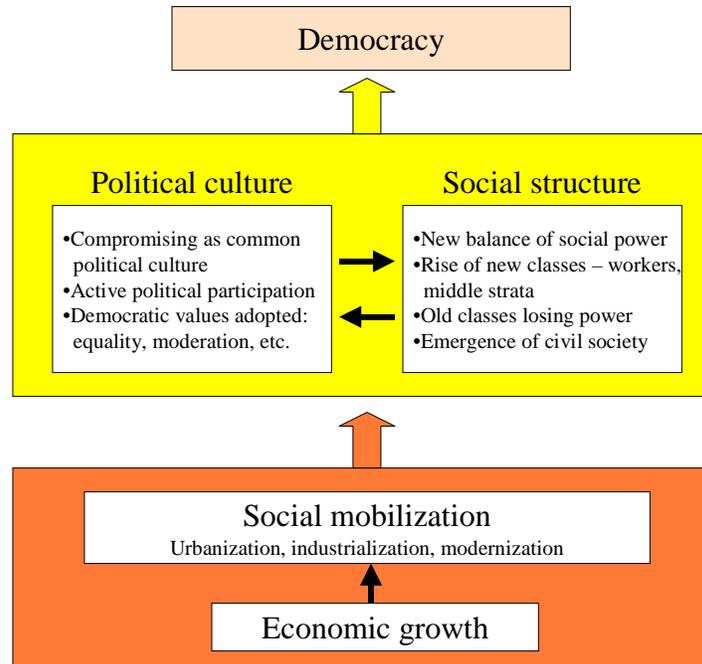


Figure 1. Democratic Transformation

3. A developmental threshold for democracy

3.1 Social structure

Our first set of question is as follows: what is ‘social structure’? How important is it in understanding political development?

Politics is, by nature, a struggle of power among groups of interests in the society⁴. This is why the study of social structure – how groups of interests are positioned in the system and how their relative powers are distributed – is of decisive significance in understanding political development. Unfortunately, however, no one has submitted a universally acceptable definition of social structure so far. In this paper, we avoid

⁴ See also Held and Leftwich 1984:144.

stepping into the endless debate on the precise definition of social structure. Instead, we will use this term narrowly and operationally to suit our purpose at hand.

We can infer, from the discussion of Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens in *Capitalist development and democracy* (1992:47-50), that social structure includes class structure and the balance of power between contending classes. Also, in modern study of democratization, the balance of power between the state and civil society should also be taken into consideration. This is because, as Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992: 50) observes, modern states are more powerful and possesses certain autonomy from the ruling class. Civil society, meanwhile, poses as a counter-hegemonic entity, challenging the power of the state.

Why should social class occupy the center in study of social structure? Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) discuss this question carefully. Their argument may be summed up as follows: (1) class refers to the structured and cumulatively unequal distribution of the objects of near-universal desire, of the material of necessities of life and other economic resources, of respect and honor, and of power and influence. As such, class deserves a central place in any social science analysis; (2) class, as conceptualized in Marxist literature, is collective actors that make a decisive difference in history. One more reason can be added here, using Leftwich's definition of politics⁵: only when the class composition of the ruling bloc changes could the way of using and allocating resources in the society (or form of politics) be transformed completely.

Our second set of question is the following: how does social structure change in the development process? And how do those changes facilitate the installment and maintenance of democracy? To be more specific, we can pose the questions this way: what changes does development cause with respect to class structure and balance of power between contending classes, and in terms of the balance of power between state and civil society? And how do those changes affect the chances for democracy?

Transformation of the society from an agrarian one to an industrial one entails complex changes in social occupational structure. During industrialization, the number of farmers decreases quickly while the working class and the middle stratum grow substantially. As new classes are added, the society become pluralist for it has more groups of interest. Also, class struggle changes not only because new players are entering the arena but also because the political agenda has shifted. Each new class brings with it distinct political aspirations.

Middle class men are among the main beneficiaries of economic development. Their interests stay firmly with political stability and continued development. As they grow in size, wealth and influence, they seek political inclusion to enhance their share in the allocating and using of resources as well as to protect their freedom and other basic rights. However, the economic interests of the middle class conflict with those of the working class. While the former wants to keep labor cost low for economic development, the latter demands for wage increase and improvement of working conditions. Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992) remark that the political attitude of the

⁵ See this essay:19.

middle class is thus ambivalent. They long for political opening up but may change their minds if the labor movement is 'dangerously' too strong.

By contrast, the working class is consistently pro-democratic. Workers generate a large part of the wealth of the nation. Nevertheless, their lives do not improve at the same rate as that of the upper class. Thus, distributive justice is their ultimate political goal. The working class, however, share with other subordinate friends the desire for liberty and good governance which democracy promises. In summary, the two new power contenders born in the modernization process, the middle class men and workers, both have strong democratic orientations, though they may differ on the degree and consistency.

Among the rest, farmers are traditionally weak in awareness and organization. Landowners and the bourgeoisie, meanwhile, see their privileges endangered by the political bidding of new classes and are, therefore, against political reforms. Historically, landowners have always been anti-democratic, as Barrington Moore shows us in *The Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*.

The political stance of the bourgeoisie is mixed and highly dependent on historical context. They were the main force behind Western democratic revolutions. Their role was so important that Moore exclaims: 'No bourgeoisie, no democracy'. Nowadays, however, capitalist development has been established in almost all countries and a peculiar coalition exists between the bourgeoisie and the modern state. As the bourgeoisie's primary economic interest lies in development and guarantee of the institutional infrastructure of capitalist development, they want to restrict state intervention. At the same time, they need the state in their struggle against labor movement. Their bid against democracy is therefore less consistent and radical than their strategic partners.

The shift in the balance of power is predictably in favor of the new classes along the path of intensified industrialization. No doubt, the change in the social structure will eventually bring democratization as the pro-democratic alliance becomes overwhelming.

One small point can be added here on the variables that should be taken into consideration in assessing the strength of classes. Change in size is, of course, always important. In a recent cross-national quantitative research, however, Doorenspleet (2002:61) finds no correlation between the increase in size of both the working class and the middle class and the likelihood that a nation begins its transition to democracy. Though the method of investigation must be examined closely before we can evaluate the result properly (the time span for investigation is, for example, very short: from 1990-1994), Doorenspleet's findings urge political theorists to be more cautious when assessing the strength as well as the balance of power among contending classes in a society. Being large in number is just one advantage. Other factors that should be taken into consideration include political awareness and ideology, organization, and political entrepreneurship -- having a clear agenda and appropriate tactics for political struggle. Rueschemeyer, Stephens and Stephens (1992:54) attach special attention to the organizational ability of a class. In their opinion, organization is the only means of 'empowering the many'.

3.2 Political culture

Is political culture a useful variable? Does it deserve a separate place in the examination of the developmental threshold for democracy?

Political scientists from both the left and the right have several reasons to hold reservations about the matter. Political rationalists assert that all political actors are short-run interest maximizers. Thus, one could get sufficient explanatory power simply by assuming self-centered rationality and any study on political culture is just a waste of resources. Marxists, meanwhile, challenge the legitimacy of political culture research on the grounds that political and social attitudes are mere reflections of class or ethnic status, or else the ‘false consciousness’ implanted by such institutions as schools and the media (Almond 1993:x).

Rationalists have a point in assuming that political actors tend to be interest maximizers. Evidence shows, however, that while making choice between possible political actions, voters, politicians or rulers are naturally influenced by their own set of beliefs, values and political customs – that is, their political culture.

Argument made by Marxists is stronger and subtler. For example, a bourgeoisie would have different opinion and action from a worker on the same political issue such as the popular suffrage. Undoubtedly, political culture owes a great deal to class interest. People of one class have similar concerns and aspirations. Therefore, they tend to have common views on the political issues. Similarly, members of classes which occupy different positions in the political system develop different views and concepts of power and the way it should be distributed. Class interests, however, do not exhaust the origins of political culture. Verba (1965:550) reminds us that ‘political cultures are learned’, meaning that we acquire beliefs, values and attitudes through our education, our socialization and also through getting involved into the political process. Thus, just as how other aspects of culture are formed, development in political culture has to be traced in socio-economic changes of the society, and is more complex than a mere reflection of class and/or ethnic status.

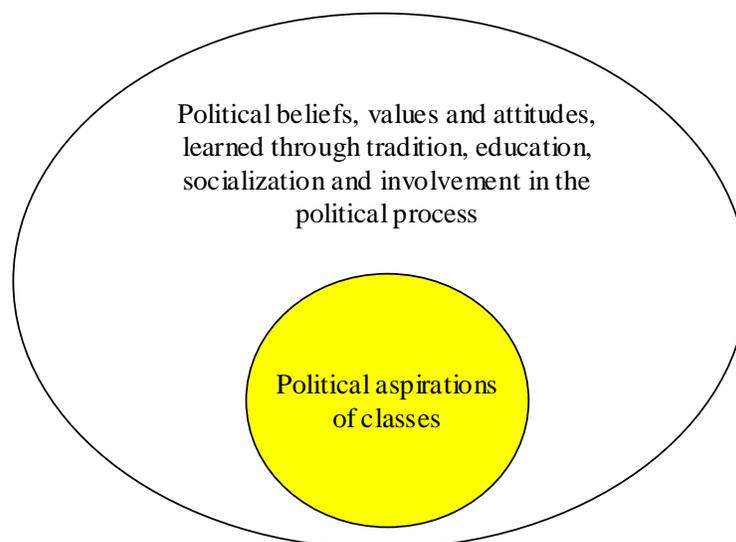


Figure 2. Components of Political Culture

How important is political culture in examining the developmental threshold for democracy? According to Verba (1965:513), the political culture of a society consists of a system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols and values that define the background in which political action takes place. Just as culture in general gives meaning to social life, political culture provides ideational base for politics. As such, studying political culture is important in understanding political development, including when a democratic transition is concerned.

More precisely, two main reasons could be submitted for this. First, as Almond (1956:34-42) observes: 'Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientation to political actions'. Democracy, as the first form of politics to attach high importance on the participation of a society's members, requires a distinctive political culture. Prominent theories all agree that if a democracy is to function well, its participants must possess a certain cluster of concepts on power and the way to organize power. It is also necessary that the citizens acquire the following set of political values and orientations: moderation, tolerance, civility, efficacy, knowledge and participation.

Secondly, as the main guideline for members of a political system, any change in political culture will eventually affect the development course of the whole system. Diamond (1993: 7-8) defines political culture as '*a people's predominant beliefs, attitudes, values, ideals, sentiments and evaluations about the political system of its country, and the role of the self in that system*'. According to this definition, political culture could be seen with two distinctive contents: (1) the *cognitive* including knowledge about the political system, and (2) the *evaluational* consisting of feelings and judgments on the performance of the political system which are based on prominent values, ideals and beliefs of the people. The evaluational part deserves our attention since it changes as people become more experienced. People's feelings of satisfaction or frustration with the performance of the political system and their opinions on how it should be better organized are decisive in determining their political preferences. Preferences, when shared by a considerable part of the population, will create pressures for political reforms. Progressive spiritual attitudes also have a greater impact when materialized into organizations or associations. In short, political culture of a nation is not 'durable and persistent' as Pye (1985:20) states. It does change and subsequently demand for transformation in politics. Evidence for it abounds in the history of, for instance, Germany, Italy, Spain and Japan: competitive politics has been doing well in these countries, which were once considered as infertile land for democracy.

How does development bring about changes in political culture that are relevant to the chances for democracy? Scholars have discussed the matter extensively. The most important points are that: (1) through the social mobilization process, individuals form commitments to new groups and associations (including new classes). As the social structure shifts towards pluralism, they also learn new patterns of political behavior; and (2) education and media also play an important role in enhancing people's political understandings and changing their set of values as well as political orientations.

In conclusion, the two variables we have examined, *social structure* and *political culture*, are both endogenous to the modernization process. Changes in them lay foundation of and at the same time create pressures for democracy to be installed.

3.3 The timing of the threshold

Can we determine the timing of the threshold in a concrete manner? Can we say, for example, that such-and-such indicators of socio-economic development have risen sufficiently so the society is ready for democracy?

Scholars would be delighted to find the answer. Deutsch (1961) proposes a solution based on the examination of two types of threshold in the social mobilization process, namely *threshold of significance*, S, and *threshold of criticality*, C. Deutsch defines the threshold of significance as the 'numerical value below which no significant departure from the customary workings of a traditional society can be detected and no significance disturbance appears to be created in its unchanged functioning'. Threshold of criticality meanwhile is 'that of criticality for significant changes in the side effects actual or apparent, of the process of social mobilization' (*ibid*: 497). The task then is to find out at what level of each of the (socio-economic) indicators such changes in social or political side effects appear.

At Deutsch's suggestion, we may want to choose m_1 for prosperity, m_2 for literacy, m_3 for exposure to mass media, etc. and try to find their thresholds of criticality at which significant changes relevant to democratization appear. Of course, as Deutsch observes, the thresholds may not come at the same time since indicators do not change at the same rate (*ibid*:495). There should be, however, a point when all the changes are large enough so that democratization has to be carried out.

There is a problem with Deutsch's theory. The fact holds that different countries adopted democracy at very different points measured by their socio-economic indicators. What is wrong? Again, like other quantitative scientists, Deutsch tries to connect socio-economic development directly to political transformation. This leads to distortion and inaccuracy because only when the immediate level (social structure and political culture, as discussed above) changes can politics change. If, for some reason, the development of level two is retarded or accelerated, we will accordingly see democratization at a higher or lower level of socio-economic indicators.

In fact, it would be better to determine a threshold of criticality for changes in social structure and political culture. Several variables could be used to examine the extent to which the balance of power and the political culture of a society change. For instance, we could assess the strength of the pro-democratic alliance by looking at the percentage of workers and middle class men in the society (demographic size), percentage of organized activities against authoritarianism (organizational skill), percentage of people who are in favor of democratic reforms (political preference). Of course, things are not as simple as that. A lot more study is required to find the best way to measure the two important components before we can construct a model to predict the developmental threshold for democracy.

Part II

ENDOGENOUS FACTORS IN KOREAN DEMOCRATIZATION

This part consists of two sections. The first is a historical presentation of Korean democratic transition with attention on the immediate causes of political reforms; the second offers another level of analysis by investigating the structural changes within the country that promoted the democratization process. Through these analyses, it is shown that the most decisive factors of democratization in South Korea were endogenous to its development process.

4. Political transition in South Korea in the 1980s

It is not surprising that the 1980s is chosen as the period in focus of any investigation into Korea's democratization. This was, indeed, an eventful decade in South Korea, starting with the assassination of dictator Park Chung Hee in 1979 and the establishment of another repressive regime under general-turn-president Chun Do Hwan. The 1980s was also the time when economic as well as socio-political conflicts within the country culminated. They were partly solved in June 1987 by Roh Tae Woo's eight-point democratisation package. Roh later became the first directly elected president after three decades of authoritarianism, marking an important moment in the consolidation of democracy in South Korea.

Before going into details of Korean democratization, it should be pointed out clearly that the main purpose of this study is to highlight the endogenous elements that pressed for political reforms. This is not to say that international factors were not important. On the contrary, changes in the world political arena in the 1980s had a great impact on Korea intensifying the internal struggle for openness. South Korea's political transition was in fact in tune with the third wave of global democratization (Huntington 1981); it was obviously under pressure from the international community and the democratic wind blowing from other countries at the time. However, for democracy to be successfully installed and sustained, external pressure is not enough. It must be rooted inside the country: the people of South Korea must be ready for it and the socio-economic infrastructure of the country must support it. The most decisive factors of democratization, as I will argue below, are steadily created by the long period of high profile development in South Korea.

Let us take a look at the democratization process as it occurred in South Korea.

4.1 Before 1987: economic prosperity and socio-political suffocation

Before 1987, South Korea was as a country of contrasts. While it had advanced a long way economically, the country was groaning under a harsh military dictatorship.

Korean achievements in economic development were impressive. According to Kwon (1990: xxii), Korea's GDP growth was among the highest in the world: an average of 8.6% from 1962 to 1986. The economic structure also changed rapidly: the percentage of manufacturing and mining in GDP rose from 16.4% in 1962 to 32.4% in 1986. The share of machinery and equipment in total exports, which is often used as an indicator of

industrialization, rose from only 2.6% to 33.5% in the same period. By 1987, after about 30 years of high economic performance, the country had transformed itself from a largely agricultural subsistence economy into a newly industrialized economy. South Korea jumped up the economic hierarchy of nations from the 99th richest country to 44th (Potter 1997:226). To borrow the words by World Bank experts, such accomplishments in such a short span of time bordered on 'the miraculous'.

Yet Korea remained highly underdeveloped in its politics. From 1961 until 1987, the country was ruled by two military generals who absorbed almost all power into their own hands. The political system was highly repressive. Authority was restricted to the presidents and their circle of henchmen. Opposition was either banned or deprived of fair chances to compete for power. The Korean state exercised tight control over all aspects of the socio-political life in the country.

After seizing the power through a coup d'état, Park Chung Hee took several steps to consolidate his control: he (1) suspended the constitution, (2) dissolved the National Assembly, (3) eliminated all locally elected authorities and replaced them with appointed staff including many military officers, (4) reorganized the government, jailing many of those from previous administrations while confiscating their wealth, (5) disbanded all existing political parties, and most important of all, he (6) created a pervasive intelligence network called the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). KCIA later became the ears and the eyes of the president, which he used to control the whole system.

The state's presence was not limited to the public sector. Professional and civic groups were also reorganized and centralized and the military government even placed its trusted supporters in positions of authority in labor unions, teachers unions and like organizations. David Steinberg (1995: 376) observes that 'no element of the society was left untouched' under Park Chung Hee. Chun Doo Hwan acted in almost the same manner when he ascended to power, also through a coup d'état, in 1979.

During his 18 years' ruling, under fierce pressures both from inside and outside the country, Park ordered presidential and parliamentary elections 4 times. He formed himself a political party, the Democratic Republican Party, which was funded in part through the manipulation of various industries and the stock market. It was widely believed that the president fostered minor opposition candidates to run, splitting the opposition vote so that he could win. He also mobilized the extensive military vote, a pattern that persisted for over a generation. Observers thus saw the elections more as a means to retain power rather than as real competition. Politics under Park Chung Hee, in fact, was restricted to a small circle of military elites, upper bourgeoisie, technocrats and bureaucrats. Opposition would never have the real chance for political influence even when they had seats in the National Assembly, as this body was controlled either by the strong arm or illegal tactics. The legislature was thoroughly emasculated. Park's successor, Chun Doo Hwan, was even more heavy-handed. He ordered the imprisonment of hundreds of regime critics. One of the two most prominent opposition figures, Kim Dae Jung was abducted and threatened. The other's office was stormed by riot police. In short, both Park and Chun were very repressive in their approach to politics.

Social conditions were even more suffocating. Under the Park and Chun regimes, the freedom of speech and assembly was severely limited. Anyone who was critical of

elections or government policies would soon find their house visited by the police, or even charged with ‘sympathy with Communism’, ‘impairing constitutional organs’, and the like, and imprisoned. In 1961, Park Chung Hee reinforced the existing Law of National Security of 1948 with a new Anti-Communist Law. Together, the two legislative documents provided bases for arrests and trials of anti-regime factions. According to Pae (1986:80), under Park and his successor Chun Doo Hwan those laws were used as effective tools for suppressing the disobedient. Charges of Communist conspiracy, for example, were prevalent throughout the Third, Fourth and Fifth Republic. Prominent cases included the trial of Sun Min Ho and his brother in 1972, trials of seven political dissidents in relation to the People’s Revolutionary Party in 1974, conspiracy trial of opposition politician Kim Dae Jung and his co-defendants in relation to the Kwangju incident in 1980, and so on.

Mass media was also under state censorship. Pae (1986:82) observes a constant uneasy truce between the press and the government. The press was allowed to criticize corruption and irregularities in electoral or parliamentary procedure and to cover debates at National Assembly. However, these rights were assured only when (1) elections were over, (2) the constitutional amendment had already been ratified, (3) student demonstrations against the government were absent, and (4) the government felt secure. Otherwise, the government would resort to either direct control through laws and decrees or indirect methods including threats of violence or economic sanctions. General-turned-president Chun Doo Hwan seemed especially sensitive to the media. Just months after gaining power, he suspended 67 publications for ‘failing to meet the government’s standards’, reorganized the country’s mass media, closed three national daily newspapers, six news agencies and several provincial newspapers. All Korean television stations were later to be ‘donated’ to the state.

The most negative characteristic of the Park and Chun regimes, however, lay in their treatment of workers. South Korea was notoriously known to have one of the world harshest labor laws. Article 13 of the revised labor law in 1968 stated that the workplace ‘shall have the authority to determine working conditions’. Even when the working conditions were clearly stipulated in laws, they were seldom observed. Ironically, the government was in close cooperation with employers to oppress the workers because a low labor cost would be advantageous to their ‘growth at all cost’ policy. The incident of Chun Tae Il provides a good example of the situation⁶. The government always sided with the employers in labor disputes. Workers were denied the right to organize regional or national unions that made it more difficult for them to bargain with the managers. Small and separated unions at enterprise level lacked leadership, expertise, and financial strength and were numerically disadvantaged. This was how the Park and Chun government effectively weakened the workers’ movement.

⁶ The twenty-two year old Chun Tae Il was a subsistence worker at Seoul’s Peace Market. On reading the Labor Standard Act, he found that none of the working conditions required by law was applied at the Peace Market. Chun and his friends decided to make appeal to the government’s Office of Labor Affairs but nobody would listen to them. The angry young men then made a public demonstration in front of the Peace Market where they were beaten and humiliated by employers aided by the police. The next demonstration was ghastly: again attacked by the police and employers, Chun protested by pouring gasoline over his body and set himself afire. (According to George E. Ogle (1990) *South Korea: Dissent within the Economic Miracle*. London: Zed).

The state also held tight control of the economy. Under Park Chung Hee, commercial banks were nationalized. The government also controlled other sources of credit that came from overseas. As the credit market was under strict state control, the survival of Korean firms depended on accessibility to low-cost bank and foreign capital, giving the government necessary strength in negotiation. With such a powerful tool in hand, together with several other control measures, the government intervened in the business of enterprises to steer the economy in the direction it wanted. This is not necessarily bad. Indeed, many scholars would point out that it was, in fact, thanks to the active role of the state that South Korea achieved rapid growth. However, such high interventionism entailed several by-products, which caused significant popular dissent.

In short, we see in South Korea before 1987 an immensely imbalanced nation of an advanced economy with a repressive socio-political system. The state was remarkably strong, with an unusual degree of autonomous power to impose its will on a weak society. As Hagen Koo (1993:2) remarks, hardly anything socially consequential was left untouched by the regulatory actions of the state, and few groups or organizations in society existed without some kind of state sanction. One wonders how such a situation could last so long. The Korean people appeared to be pliant and well managed. They seemed to have no strong desire to organize private interests in confrontation with the state. Why? Was it because, although being authoritarian, the state was responsive to the people's demands and could deliver brilliantly its promise of economic development? This does appear to be the case. A large portion of the Koreans tended to accept Park and Chun's rule so long as those regimes could ensure stability, security, order and a high growth rate. But it would be a mistake to think of the Korean society as being submissive and quiescent. Far from that, the people had a long tradition of fighting against abuse of power. As a matter of fact, since the very beginning of Park Chung Hee's reign, there had been periodic resistant movements. The dissent in the early years later developed into major conflicts between the state and the increasingly powerful social classes.

4.2 The Minjung movement

Minjung was a major social, political and cultural movement that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s in Korea. This socio-political wave, its ideology and the demonstrations carried out by its participants were the immediate causes of the important political transition in 1987. The formation of this movement reflects the economic, social and political changes in contemporary Korea before democratization.

Literally, the word meant 'the people' or 'the masses'. *Minjung* represents the popular resistant spirit against repression and the undemocratic state. Since 1972, with the installation of the Yushin regime, the term became so popular that it was used as a symbol and a slogan by diverse groups – students, writers, journalists, church leaders and party leaders – to mobilize people to oppose authoritarian rule.

According to Koo (1993:143), the main participants in the *minjung* movement included workers, peasants and segments of the middle class. Since the very beginning, the bourgeois element was missing from the populist alliance behind *minjung*. This distinctive feature was rooted in the special economic and socio-political context when the movement was formed. Korean *minjung* took shape in a rapidly industrializing society under an extraordinary strong and repressive state as a form of popular response

to 'the consequences of capital accumulation led by monopoly capital' (*ibid*:143). As shown later, the upper class, including the majority of the middle stratum, kept a low profile politically for most of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s. Only a small segment of it, namely the students and progressive intellectuals, occupied leadership roles in the Korean *minjung*. These people sought to mobilize workers and farmers in struggles for political and economic democratization. The absence of a bourgeois element in *minjung* had two implications: first, it made the movement relatively more homogeneous in terms of class character (in fact, Korean *minjung* bears a closer relationship to the labor movement); secondly, it enabled *minjung* to have more radical economic and socio-political objectives. As industrialization intensified and repression increased, the concept of *minjung* was sharpened into a broad ideology that touched all the economic, political and social realities of Korean society. Basically, it advocated an open political system in which democratic rights were rigorously observed. *Minjung* further demanded a radical restructuring of the economy in order to achieve distributive justice.

Among the participants in Korean *minjung*, two most prominent were the students and the workers. Students had always been sensitive to progressive ideas in Korea. They had a long tradition of non-violent protest under the Japanese colonial regime and held demonstrations leading to the fall of the autocratic Syngman Rhee regime in 1960. This group, however, was small. They were not allowed to create formal organizations outside campus through which they could freely and independently interact with other political partners. These features were the serious limitations on the student movement.

Different from the student movement, Korea's labor movement was a new phenomenon, emerging from the country's industrialization process. Born late, the Korean working class nevertheless grew up fast in size, awareness and organization. If in the early 1960s, little was heard of the working class in Korea, then by the end of the decade, especially after the self immolation of Chun Tae Il in November 1970, numerous strikes, labour conflicts and demonstrations had become normal activities in the country's socio-political life. The self-immolation of worker Chun Tae Il in November 1970 not only opened a new era in the struggle of the Korean working class, it also facilitated the exchange between this segment of the population with the students and other progressive intellectuals of the country, forming the basis for a more broad-based anti-regime movement: the *minjung*. From mid-1970s, pressures for democratization became stronger, with street protests, strikes, demonstrations and many other activities.

Another benchmark in the development of the *minjung* came after October 1979 with the assassination of Park Chung Hee. The crisis within the ruling regime and the concomitant paralysis of the coercive apparatuses allowed the new democratic alliance to demonstrate their aspirations through collective action. In a special announcement on November 10, 1979, acting president Choe Kyu Ha declared that the constitution would be amended to 'promote democracy' and that a new election would be held under the amended constitution. Choe also ordered the restoration of civil rights of Park's rivals and hundred of professors and journalist punished by the dictator for being critical of the regime. These events created the euphoria known as the 'Seoul spring' in which people had high expectations for the return to democracy.

Optimistic feelings soon died when another military coup d'etat was carried out by Chun Doo Hwan and his men. Chun subsequently established the Fifth Republic and made

himself the president. He declared martial law in May 1980 and ordered the arrests of opposition figures including Kim Dae Jung, Kim Jong Pil and Kim Yong Sam. Once again, universities were closed and the National Assembly suspended. Disappointed dissidents staged massive protests against the new military regime. The most fierce and sustained street demonstrations took place in May 18 in Kwangju, the capital of South Cholla Province, with the participation of tens of thousands of people. Chun Doo Hwan bared his teeth, sending tanks, armored personnel carriers to fight against the rioters. The result was horribly bloody: by the government's own count, more than 200 people were killed and thousands were wounded and arrested (Oh 1990: 90).

In many respects the Kwangju incident was the culmination of a long series of demonstrations by the people demanding basic rights. The massacre had several implications. For the first time since the Korean War, the government had to resort to force in confronting the people, which meant the balance of power had already changed in favor of the populist alliance. The Kwangju carnage also left a bloodstain on Chun's government and somehow discredited it since the very beginning. This is where the Chun regime is different from that of Park Chung Hee. Critics point out that though Park ruled South Korea with an iron fist, he never had to use force in such a blatant and brutal manner.

The political pattern in South Korea also changed entirely after mass killings carried out by the military in Kwangju. After the incident, the dissident alliance became more militant and expanded even more rapidly, engaging workers in both light and heavy industries. Meanwhile, the middle class also came to ally with students and workers. This important social stratum provided the impetus for a mass campaign in 1987 that led to the democratic beginning in Korean politics.

4.3 The return to democracy in 1987

A series of scandals preceded the political transition in South Korea. The first involved a sexual assault on a female student by police interrogators in July 1986. The incident shocked the whole nation. Another human rights abuse occurred in January 14, 1987 when student activist Park Jong-chol was tortured to death by the police. The case was reported widely in Korean newspapers and quickly became a political headache. People, agitated by the brutality of the regime, took to the streets in more than 30 major cities. Among the demonstrators, observers noticed many middle class men who now joined the whole nation showing indignation and frustration at the repressive administration.

On July 13, 1987, president Chun made a fateful mistake. He stated that he was opposed to a constitutional amendment for direct presidential elections, that he would impose a moratorium on the matter until the end of his term. Popular patience with the regime ran out after this announcement. Nationwide protest escalated, shaking the Chun government by its roots. In Oh (1993:91)'s observation, there had been innumerable demonstrations in South Korea since the establishment of the First Republic but the scale and nature of demonstrations in the summer of 1987 were unprecedented. Demonstrators packed the highways and byways around Seoul and other urban centers and clashed with riot police. For weeks, South Korea was a tear gas-choked battleground. The Chun regime's defense against the people started to crumble.

Chun Doo Hwan was desperate. On June 19, he ordered some of his crack units to stand by in order to storm Seoul and deal with the demonstrators. Most of the military elites, however, did not want to repeat the Kwangju massacre. Many thought it would be wiser to come to terms with the dissidents. The softliners finally won the upper hand. On June 29, 1987, the presidential candidate of the ruling party, Roh Tae Woo, delivered an important declaration accepting the popular demand for election. A bloody clash was thus averted and the crisis stabilized. South Korea made its initial return to the democratic path.

Looking back on the 1987 political transition in South Korea, two remarks can be made. Firstly, the participation of the middle class, especially in Seoul, was among the most decisive factors that brought down Chun Doo Hwan’s government. Secondly, the victory of the democratic alliance was only partial: only one of their demands – direct election of the president – was satisfied. There was a change of government but it was more a transfer of leadership from one faction of the ruling bloc to another than substantial political transformation. Why did the democratic revolution in 1987 have such an outcome? These questions are addressed in the following section.

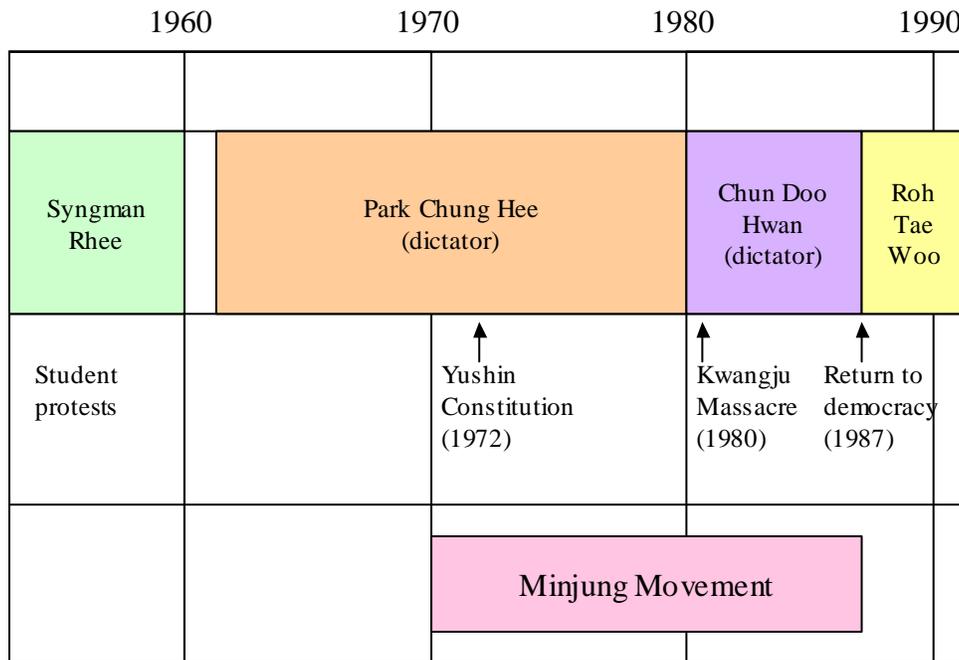


Figure 3. Political Development of South Korea after the Korean War

5. Structural analysis

In this section, socio-political changes in South Korea during the three decades of rapid economic growth are traced to see how the country had been transformed by 1987 to build a base for democratic development. We will also ask the question of whether and how the theoretical argument in the first part of this paper fits the Korean experience. The balance of power between contending classes in the society, the political culture, the

emergence of a civil society and its relation with the state are the key factors I propose to look at in reviewing the Korean democratization.

5. 1 Changes in the balance of power

Korean society underwent a drastic and fundamental transformation during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. By 1987, after 30 years of intense industrialization, significant changes in the economic and socio-political conditions were visible. A rapid population shift from rural areas to urban centers accelerated the differentiation and diversification of the whole society in terms of economic interests and subsequently of political aspirations. In Choi (1993:29)'s observation, out of this process, the social structure was reconstituted in a pyramidal form. At the top rested the upper bourgeoisie favored by the political regime, high technocrats and bureaucrats in the public sector, and the senior executives from large firms, along with a collection of small business owners. Below this, there were middle echelon managers, petite bourgeoisie, and white-collar workers. And forming the huge base of this pyramidal structure were the industrial and service sector workers, peasants, miners, fishermen, peddlers, the underemployed and the jobless.

Two new socio-political actors emerged out of this scene: the working class and the middle stratum. Both grew in strength as capitalist development continued, and challenged the existing order. Their political bid inevitably altered the pattern and terrain of the power struggle. Below, I examine the role of these two new important classes in the democratization of South Korea. Several variables should be taken into consideration: (1) the actual and relative demographic sizes of the groups, (2) their socio-economic strength, (3) their organization, (4) their ideologies and commitment to the cause of democratization, and (5) their political entrepreneurship.

The working class and the middle class in South Korea were, in fact, brothers who owed their births to the same mother - the modernization process. Koo (1993) states that the swift urban migration from rural areas was a result of industrialization accelerated by authoritarian governments during the 1960s, 1970s and the early 1980s. This led to a significant change in the occupational structure of the country. If, in the 1950s, four out of five people were farmers, then by mid-1980s, only one of four remained on the farm (Koo 1993:137). Some of the people who sought fortune in the cities were successful and became professionals, managers, white-collar workers, etc. In short, they integrated into the existing group of well-to-do urban dwellers. The majority, however, remained poor and were absorbed into expanding factories, forming the new industrial working class. From this point, the two brothers followed very different paths. Their living conditions differed greatly from each other and, therefore, their aspirations could not stay the same.

Generally, the middle class enjoyed a much more comfortable life. According to Korean Economic Planning Board (EPB), a middle class citizen should:

1. Have a family income of at least 2.5 times as much as that of the legally-defined minimum living cost;
2. Own and dwell in a separate house or apartment;
3. Be employed on a full-time basis or own his/her enterprise; and

4. Attain high school graduation or above in education⁷.

Based on these criteria, EPB reported a rapid increase in the demographic size of the middle class thanks to unprecedented economic growth from the 1960s to the early 1980s. EPB estimated that by 1985 this social stratum had accounted for 38% of the whole population (Dong-mo 1993:77). Their significance, however, came not only from considerable number but also from their advantages in education and wealth. They held key positions in companies or in academic bodies and possessed a certain degree of respect from surrounding people. This characteristic determined their leading role in the socio-political movement once they decided to get involved in the *minjung* revolution in 1987. For a long time, before this democratization, they kept quite a low profile and stayed apathetic in the face of fierce confrontations between their brother working class and the state. What explains this apathy?

Oh (1990:69) points out that being among the main beneficiaries of the economic boom, the middle class placed a high premium on political stability because that would ensure continued high growth. They were willing to support reforms but not at the expense of basic equilibrium and balance in the body politic. While enjoying a share of economic development, the middle class was alienated politically. They were frustrated by the repressive control exercised by the authoritarian government. Therefore, they supported democratization to the extent that it would open up politics and assure civil rights.

The working class expected more from democratization. The democratic ideal appealed to them because, besides freedom, it promised equality as well. Workers hoped they could enjoy greater distributive justice under a democratic regime. The discrepancy in the meanings of democratization between the two classes was conditioned by their very different living environments. Choi (1993:30) noticed that though income levels of the Korean population as a whole significantly increased thanks to economic boom, the improvement was not at the same rate among classes and thus widened the socio-economic gap. In fact, the wages of industrial workers amounted only to less than one-fifth of middle-level managers and white-collar workers. Blue-collar workers had to work harder in harsher conditions. They assumed the burden for the development of the national economy. Nevertheless, they were repressed by the government, and were deprived of even the basic right of forming independent unions. To add to their dissatisfaction, the social welfare system was poor. The few programs that were provided, such as health insurance, were tailored for the upper classes only. It can be said without exaggeration that industrial workers in South Korea contributed the largest part to national prosperity yet received few of its fruits. They were alienated both economically and politically. That is why the working class adopted a more militant and radical political approach.

The working class expanded tremendously along with rapid industrialization. According to the same estimation by EPB, workers in South Korea accounted for more than 50% of the whole population in 1985 (Won-mo 1993:77). They lived in big communities in the

⁷ Quoting from Han'guk Ilbo, Han'guk chungsa'ng, p. 10. Dong Won-mo (1993) 'The democratisation of South Korea: what role does the middle class play?' James Cotton (ed) *Korea under Roh Tae Woo: Democratization, Northern Policy, And Inter-Korean Relations*. Canberra: Allen & Unwin: pp77

vicinity of industrial parks. It was through frequent interaction among themselves that the working people began to acquire a common identity and a feeling of class. They realized the necessity of collective struggles if working conditions were to be improved.

Koo (1993:137) notes that there were three development periods of labor movement from the 1960s to the early 1980s. At the beginning of the economic boom, newly recruited workers were too absorbed in adapting themselves to the factory work to react collectively to improve their working conditions. The high level of unemployment in both rural and urban areas allowed them little bargaining power. Though the working conditions and wages were unsatisfactory, workers tended to cope with the situation at individual level. There were some trade unions in the public sector but few were found in private enterprises.

A few years later, however, things began to change, especially after the self-immolation of Chun Tae Il in 1970. Chun's suicide marked a turning point in the development of labor movement as the workers realized their plight and the need to unite themselves against oppression. Unions were set up though many had to operate underground. There, workers would gather to study and share with others their points of view. Strikes and demonstrations were better organized.

Another incident that marked the new political maturity of the working class occurred in 1980. Making use of the temporary paralysis of the repressive machine after the assassination of Park Chung Hee, workers coordinated with students and others to stage massive demonstrations to express their aspirations. The dissent movement was so strong that the authority had to resort to force to quell it, committing a massacre in the city of Kwangju. After the tragedy, the workers became even more politicized and radical. They found more solidarity among themselves. Besides demanding economic improvements, they started to fight for political goals of forming independent unions and amending labor laws, using better organizational skills and wiser tactics.

Thus, by 1987, the working class had grown greatly both in its quantity and quality. During the struggles, their strength was confirmed through solidarity, organization and improved political entrepreneurship. They were the most active player in the dissident force. When the middle class finally decided to shake hands with them to turn against the rotten regime, together they formed an overwhelming and powerful democratic alliance.

It is worthwhile to have a look at this alliance. Several questions may be asked: what made the middle class finally abandon their previous position of acquiescence and join the dissident force in 1987? And what is the nature of such a political alignment?

Many scholars argue that the middle class decided to support the dissidents in 1987 because they were greatly shocked at the brutality of the Chun regime exposed earlier in a series of scandals committed by the police. Dong Won-mo (1993:88) says that such abuses of state power became 'an instant *cause celebre* of the democratic movement'. What's more, Chun Doo Hwan made a fateful mistake on April 13, 1987, when he announced his opposition to constitutional amendment. This was another drop in the glass that caused the water to overflow, decisively pushing the middle class to the dissident side. In short, Won-mo (1993:89) concludes 'the principal issues motivated more than one million citizens in all major cities to join the spontaneous nationwide

protest movement were the violation of human rights and the constitutional issues pertaining to the people's right to choose the president in the manner they determined'.

Is the explanation such as the one proposed by Won-mo satisfactory? Is it true that the middle class changed their opinions of the Chun regime just because of its brutal abuse of power exposed in the media? One wonders why they did not take the same move in 1980 when an even more horrible violation of human rights was committed by the government in Kwangju. Evidence suggests that the disapproval of the violent nature of the military-dominant regime was only one among the many reasons why the middle class changed their attitude. Other motivations included economic, security and political considerations of this social group. As analyzed above, the main concerns of the middle class were social order and continued economic development. As the class gathered quantity and strength, they also demanded a fair share in the management of the country's political life. In 1980, the national economy was in recession and the whole society was in disorder due to demonstrations, a situation that was seen as excessively dangerous by the middle class. Thus, when Chun Doo Hwan staged a military coup and stabilized the country, a majority of the middle class implicitly supported the new regime. Given their strength in size and economic power, the silence of the middle class in 1980 at the repression by Chun was in fact a great help for the new administration, allowing it to consolidate the power. Some social scientists also rightly point out that the labor movement in 1980 focused more on its economic objective that conflicted with the interests of middle class. That was another reason why the middle stratum refused to join the struggle.

Things were different in 1987. This time the economy was in the phase of robust growth. Changes in the international arena also helped the middle class to feel more secure. The threat of invasion by North Korea was less visible. The middle class became more confident. Meanwhile the Chun Doo Hwan state machinery had been weakened for the following reasons. First, its political base became thinner as Chun lost both the rural and chaebol support due to his austere economic policies and brutal use of force against civilians. Secondly, it was internally divided between the hardliners and the softliners - an increasing number of officials within the administration became ready to come to terms with the opposition, preferring a more subtle use of state power. In 1987, the middle class also wanted to reject the Chun regime on account of its rampant corruption and violation of civil rights. Popular opinion was that 'the rationale by the ruling regime of the de facto suspension of the constitutionally guaranteed rights, on the grounds of national security and economic development, had outlived its legitimacy and persuasiveness as an acceptable government policy' (*ibid*: 89). There was also an additional economic motivation that will be clarified in a later section. In short, the conditions were just right in 1987 for the middle class to turn against the military regime in search for a share of political power. The reason they joined the democratic alliance was because they came to share the common goal of ousting the authoritarian government.

Such cooperation could not be sustained for long, however, because the two main actors in the alliance, namely the middle class and the workers, had very different understandings of democratization. As we have seen, while the working class yearned for distributive justice, the middle stratum was concerned more with the establishment of

civil rights and democratic institutions. Thus, when presidential candidate Roh Tae Woo gave in to the demand of direct election and some civil rights, the middle class men congratulated themselves for victory and immediately lost their energy to push the democratic revolution further. The alliance between middle class and working class soon dissolved.

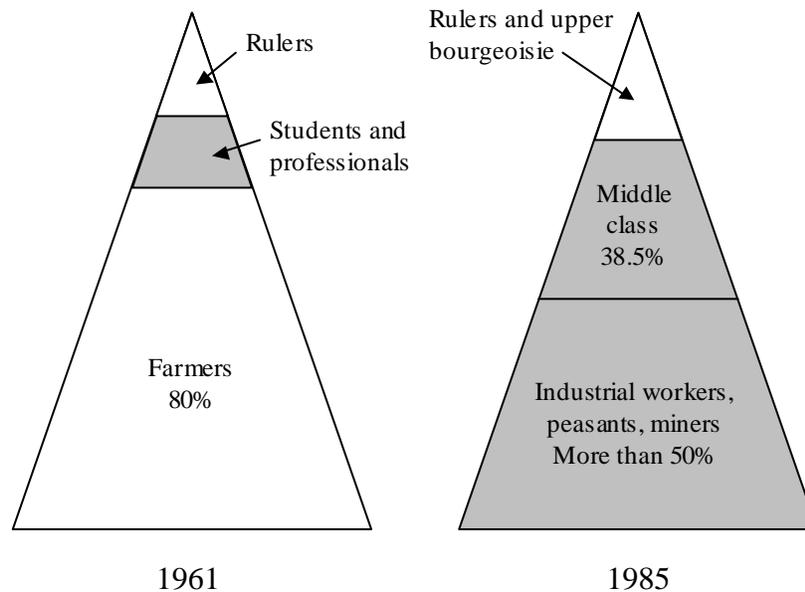
On assessing changes in the balance of power prior to Korea's democratization, a quantitative trend is visible in which the democratic alliance became increasingly larger in size, especially when they sided with one another. The state, meanwhile, became weaker, losing its political base and being internally divided.

Chun's government could never overcome the Kwangju tragedy. This was the first reason Koreans disliked his regime. Many compared it with that of Park Chung Hee and pointed out that Chun was more repressive. Following his predecessors, on seizing power, Chun also sought legitimacy of his regime in continued economic development. He turned to technocratic reformers who advised an austerity package of fiscal restraint, monetary control and a freeze on wages. The result was positive: Chun was able to stabilize the economy and sustain the high rate of growth. Socio-politically, however, it was disastrous. Deep cuts in government expenditure made the already poor welfare system worse. The new tax system, which taxed salary and wage income at much higher rates than income from capital and land, placed the burden of supporting the expanded state on the shoulders of the lower and middle classes. Fiscal restraints severely victimized farmers by shrinking the grain management fund and eliminating the fertilizer account. The quality of life among rural dwellers that used to be the political base for the government under Park Chung Hee quickly deteriorated. Real wage declined, making the workers' plight even more serious. Big businesses (chaebols) were also dissatisfied with the government who attempted to squeeze them with tight credit controls.

Choi (1993:36) states that another reason why Chun was highly unpopular was that he built his regime on the basis of an amended Yushin constitution but did not introduce significant changes to the structure of government or the major policies. Chun even copied Park's privatized authoritarian style and placed him at the apex of a vast network of corruption and extortion. According to Choi (1993:36), it was later revealed during the investigation by the National Assembly into the corruption of the Fifth Republic that this concentration and misuse of power generated visibly negative effects on the economy. In the process, the upper classes came to have ambivalent attitudes toward the Chun regime, recognizing on the one hand that Chun was a reliable guarantor of their monopoly interests, but disgruntled on the other by the extortion of political contributions and the state's meddling in business. Not surprisingly, while managing successfully in terms of economic development, the Chun regime saw its political base shrink considerably.

What is more, growing popular opposition divided Chun's government. Observers notice the emergence of two different camps within the administration by the late 1980s: the one comprised of hardliners with Chun as the leader and the other of softliners who were represented by Roh Tae Woo.

In short, by the end of the 1980s, the balance of power had already tipped in favor of the dissident alliance in South Korea and the country's social structure was ready for a political transformation.



Source: Economic Planning Board, according to Dong Won-mo 1993 and Hagen Koo 1993.

Figure 4. Changes in Social Structure of South Korea

5.2 Changes in political culture

This section is devoted to the question of how Korean political culture changed during the years of intensive development (1961-1987). This is a rather difficult task since supporting materials on the subject are few. The paucity of evidence possibly comes from two reasons: (1) transformation in political culture itself was subtle, complex and hard to measure; and (2) under authoritarianism, any expression sympathetic to democracy would not survive the strict state censorship. Therefore, we can only trace the change indirectly by comparing Korean political culture before and after the period.

Before 1961, Korea's political culture was a mixture of conservative Asian thoughts derived from Confucianism, Japanese militarism and some indigenous traditions. A few years under the occupation of American troops and the heavily dependence on the superpower later also brought in a gush of liberal democratic ideas. The conservative elements were, however, overwhelming. They became obstacles to any attempt to make democracy function in the country. Let us see how.

Koreans were distinctive for their concept of power, with respect to its attributes, uses and scope. As Pae (1986:17) observes, there existed a preponderance of politics and political centralism in Korea. Politics dominated other activities in the society including economic, educational, social and cultural. The state monopolized the authority to

allocate values and resources. The people remained passive, as they were supposed to be obedient and in a position to receive favors from their rulers. This could be seen in the following quotation:

‘King is father,
And ministers are loving mothers,
They only receive what love brings...
Peace and prosperity will prevail if each –
King, minister, subject – lives as he should’ (Steinberg 1995:37)

According to Steinberg (1995:37-39), this familial model (‘father knows best’, the leader must be obeyed and the individual sacrifices for the collective good) was critical analogy to the political life. There was a strong tendency that the power become centralized and personalized. Government was to be conducted by the example of the ruler, not by law. And loyalties were paid to those who occupied positions of authority but not the abstracted concepts nor the offices themselves.

This type of political understanding entailed several patterns of behavior: (1) factionalism, (2) intolerance, and (3) patron-client. High concentration of authority meant that those in power got everything and those out of power got little. The political struggle thus was like a zero-sum game in which parties were set up as machines for contending power, not on the basis of shared ideas. The severe inequality of wealth and influence in the society, together with the lack of institutionalization in most organizations such as bureaucracy, military, businesses, universities, etc., drove ordinary people into seeking personal ties to the powerful for protection and favors.

These features made it hard for democracy to strike roots in South Korea. Democracy, as we all know, is based on the principles of liberty and equality. Within this form of politics, the state power is limited, the rule of law is respected and individuals are supposed to get promotion through fair competition, not through personal connections.

In fact, common political practice in Korea was totally the other way round. When occupying the country, the United States did set up a political system modeled after its own democracy. The US also decentralized the state power. But American liberal ideas did not have enough time to find their way into Korean minds. Only a thin layer of the society, namely the students, was impressed while the rest of the population were cautious with democracy, partly because it was preached by the occupational power. The corruption and incompetence of the democratic Chang Myron regime further put liberal ideas into doubt. As a matter of fact, a large portion of the population was prepared to accept authoritarian Park Chung Hee so long as it ensured material prosperity.

Only two decades of high economic growth later, a dramatic change in Korean political culture was visible. Rapid industrialization was accompanied by huge social mobilization in which new classes were formed, new patterns of behavior forged, and new concepts proliferated. Democratic reforms became a shared concern of the majority of the population. In the first survey of public opinion since the Yushin regime was installed (carried out in December 1979), 73% of those interviewed clearly favored far-ranging political reforms and ‘democratization’ of the government (Oh 1993:74). Demand for democratic changes was a slogan found in numerous popular protests and in the petitions of opposition parties. The government’s claim to trade off civil rights for economic

performance was no longer seen acceptable, even among the main beneficiaries of the modernization. According to Oh (1993), a survey by Seoul National University in May 1987 showed that 85.7% of the middle class wanted to protect human rights even at the cost of economic growth (*ibid*: 91).

Change in political culture was seen most clearly in an emerging civil society. Unions and brotherhood associations were set up to provide an organizational base for challenging the government. The plans of action included political demands such as law amendments, direct popular election of the president, enhanced authorities for the legislature and the judiciary to check the president who had become overly powerful, and a system of local autonomy, to name a few. Among the forces behind the new civil society, White (1986:198) identifies the students, the workers and the Christian organizations as the most active. Their struggle nagged the authority, eroded the credibility of the regime, intensified dissent among the political elite, mobilized international support, and generally set the political scene for the regime change in 1987.

5.3 Democratization irresistible?

Democratization was indeed irresistible in Korea at the end of the 1980s because pressures for change in a democratic direction not only came from outside, but they also arose from the changes within the country's socio-political and economic system. As we have seen, by the end of the 1980s, the whole 'infrastructure' of the society – economic development, class structure – had changed, a new political culture had begun to articulate itself, and a civil society, though repressed, had also risen to challenge the power of the state. Therefore, the 'superstructure', namely politics, could not stay the same any longer. It had to be transformed to fit its socio-economic base: to become democratic.

The game theory would be useful here to study the democratic transition in South Korea. The game would involve two players: the power holder and the challenger. Obviously, the evolution in the balance of power between the two sides would be the most decisive factor for the final outcome. However, according to Tun-jen Cheng and Eun Mee Kim (1994:125), how the transitional processes end depends on bargaining situations, political entrepreneurship and calculated responses of various actors. Seen from this theoretical perspective, the specific outcome of the democratic revolution in 1987 now becomes easier to explain.

Looking back, a favorable wind was blowing for the dissident alliance (power challenger) in South Korea: they were exceedingly powerful in number – about 80% of the whole population turned against the regime at the time. Furthermore, they were supported by the international community and had a golden chance when the government would not dare to use force against them before the 1988 Olympic games. The state (power holder), on the other hand, had been weakened; they could not resort to repressive methods to rein in the rebellious people and were, themselves, internally divided. Given such an overwhelming balance of power, the partial final victory of the democratic alliance seemed modest and unsatisfactory. The challenger could force through only one major demand of direct presidential election. The power holder remained in its seats, escaping the danger with few concessions. Why?

First of all, though the challenger was strong, it was a loose alliance in which various factions held different class aspirations. This vulnerability was, of course, taken advantage of by the ruling elite. With excellent political entrepreneurship, Roh Tae Woo managed to outmaneuver the dissidents, neutralizing an important actor – the middle class – leading the government out of the crisis unscathed. Roh's June 29 declaration was decisive in sealing the outcome of the democratic transition in South Korea.

Here, it is worthwhile to reflect more generally on the importance of leadership in politics and what we have learned in this regard from our analysis of Korean democratization. A structuralist may argue that leaders are never free to make up their own minds; they are always under constraints and their decisions can be understood by studying the structural conditions they face. This argument is correct, but only up to a point. Being decision-makers, politicians sometimes possess a chance to write the history in accordance with their shrewdness and skills. The process of Korean democratization provides an excellent example in support of this.

The importance of leadership can also partly answer another related question: Why was it in 1987? Could democracy have been installed in South Korea well before that? Evidence shows that it could have been. Democratization, however superficial it might have been, was carried out in many of the African and Asian countries in the 1960s either at the direction of world superpowers or driven by the ideology of domestic leaders. South Korea itself went through a short-lived democracy under Chang from 1960 to 1961. The experience, however, was a disaster: the administration was discredited for rampant corruption and inability to uplift the national economy. Meanwhile, democratization since 1987 has survived well and up to this date, and we can say that it is an irreversible process. The difference between the two experiences with democracy lies in the infrastructure of the society. Democracy can only be sustained when it is built on a firm base of the social structure.

One last question remains: can we conclude that the process of democratization in South Korea has come to an end now that Koreans are having relatively fair periodical elections, democratic institutions and so on – in other words, they are following all procedures required by liberal democrats? I think not. Korea is still in a dynamic flux with an increasingly strong labor movement. Until the problem of distributive justice is addressed, social and political conflicts from within the society will continue to force South Korea to move ahead on the democratic path.

CONCLUSION

It is arguable that, by 1987, the overall social and ideological bases for democracy had been installed in South Korea through changes in the factors that were endogenous to the developmental process. The pressures created by these factors peaked at the end of that year when more than 80% of the population took to the street, demanding political reforms. It was then that one could feel clearly that something like a developmental threshold for democracy had been reached.

Can we then confirm the existence of such a threshold? Theoretically, yes, as we have analyzed in the first part of this paper. We now know what it is composed of and the

causal process in which the changes in basic socio-economic indicators lead to changes in the society's structure and then to political development. The model fits handsomely in the case of South Korea's democratization process. The task of determining the exact timing of the developmental threshold for democracy remains, however. This, as we found out, is very hard and requires close cooperation between sociologists and political scientists. This somehow renders our study of such a threshold less practical.

It can also be argued that the South Korean case bears unique features that have affected the final outcome, so the test of our theory is, to say the least, incomplete. This may be so. That is why I propose that we carry out more investigations into other modern cases of democratization in order to weed out the factors included by chance. Also, a greater collection of empirical evidence, as in Doorenspleet, should be encouraged if theoretical arguments are to be proved more satisfactorily.

Despite all these limitations, I believe that the examination of the developmental threshold for democracy is worthwhile, especially when democracy has become so fashionable as nowadays that "it seems to bestow an *aura of legitimacy* on modern political life" (Held 1987:1). The understanding of such a threshold is beneficial in a number of ways: (1) the analysis of the causal process from development to democracy is helpful for the leaders of developing countries who must design macroeconomic and socio-political policies; (2) the existence of such a threshold may make international donors rethink about their approach toward the conditionality of their economic aid; and (3) such understanding is essential for the progress of political science.

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