

Book Review: Seongyi Yun (2023) Two-Track Democracy in South Korea: The Interplay between institutional politics and contentious politics. Routledge.

Jose Aleman¹

On page 145 of this book, Seongyi Yun writes that “paradoxical phenomena that cannot be explained by existing political theories are occurring in South Korean politics.” This passage captures well the leitmotif of this text: that three dialectical contrasts characterize the country’s modern politics. Dr. Yun organizes the book around these contrasts, which consist of 1) the high ratings South Korea’s democracy receives from international observers versus the negative assessments its citizens render; 2) the increased political distrust citizens manifest while voting in high numbers; and 3) the diminished role sociopolitical organizations play while civic activism surges.

The book then is a comprehensive assessment of South Korean democracy and how it came to be. Dr. Yun is interested in exploring challenges and possibilities, the most important being the increase in electoral turnout among the most distrustful segment of the electorate (young voters) and “the sharp decline in the influence of civic groups” (p. 146) even as non-institutionalized forms of political participation surge. He starts by tracing the origin of South Korea’s democracy to the country’s founding, the struggles for the realization of liberal democracy, and the perils and pitfalls the system has faced since free and fair elections were restored in 1987 (electoral democracy had been available briefly between 1960 and 1961).

One noteworthy contrast between South Korea and other consolidated democracies is that “voter turnout dropped significantly after democratization in 1987. However, unlike Western countries where voter turnout continues to decline, it has recovered in South Korea and has shown an upward trend since 2010” (p. 4). In coming to terms with this difference, Dr. Yun discusses many important

¹ Jose Aleman is Professor of Political Science at Fordham University. He has degrees from Cornell University (B.A.) and Princeton University (M.A., Ph.D.) and teaches courses on Comparative Politics and Political Economy. His work focuses on democratic institutions, social movements, regime change, human rights, and social science methodology. Dr. Aleman is also interested in social policy, labour market policy, and redistributive policy. He is the recipient of a 2022-2023 Beacon Exemplar Award by the United Student Government of Fordham University "for outstanding service to the Fordham community". Please contact the author at aleman@fordham.edu.

topics in Korean politics, including regionalism, class conflict, generational divides, the rise of new media ecosystems, and the spread of non-institutional forms of political participation.

The introductory chapter lays out and explains the above-mentioned paradoxes. These contrasts remind me of a book chapter by Choi Jang Jip. In that contribution, Choi (1993) spoke about the contradiction (before 1987) between the democratic ideals proclaimed by the state and its authoritarian practices. Chapter One traces this contradiction as democracy gives way to authoritarianism multiple times (1948 to 1980), resulting in four constitutional republics. Chapter Two provides a closer analysis of two key moments in the 1980s from the standpoint of social movement theory, the aborted opening of 1980, and the successful liberalization seven years later. In so doing, the chapter moves back and forth between the “street politics” of worker and student movements, and the “high politics” of political parties, government officials, and diplomatic contacts.

Chapter Three analyzes democratic consolidation from the standpoint of changes in civil society after democratization. An important topic Dr. Yun considers in this chapter is regionalism, which found its modern expression after 1987 “based on a sense of exclusive distance from other regions, and not on positive emotions caused by attachment or pride to one’s own region” (p. 86). There is also consideration given to the problem of ideological conflict, which in Korea is multidimensional, but has recently manifested itself in differences in how social mobility is perceived: “high income groups consider the possibility of intergenerational and intragenerational social mobility high,” whereas those with low incomes think the opposite (p. 96).

In Chapter Four, the author deals with the political consequences of internet portals and social networking services, which began to appear in 2004 and 2009, respectively. The author attempts to characterize the relationship between new media formats and increases in non-institutional political participation. Chapter Five discusses the challenges digital activism presents to politicians. The author illustrates his claims using four notorious episodes of digital mobilization in recent years: the 2004 protests against the impeachment of President Roh Moo-Hyun, Hwang Woo-Suk’s stem cell research scandal, the 2008 candlelight protests against American beef imports, and the 2016-2017 candlelight protests calling for the impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye.

Nothing speaks to the changes South Korea has undergone and its unique characteristics more than the fact that the last two episodes of mass protest “were initiated and led by individuals rather than organizations” (p. 6). In addition, while “past candlelight vigils presented clear ideological and partisan tendencies, the 2008 demonstrations ... refused the Democratic Labor Party’s request to stand at the forefront of the candlelight protest” (p. 131). It is also notable that in 2008, the leaders of these protests came from sectors that are typically regarded as non-political – teenagers and housewives. That the recent candlelight protests were peaceful also speaks volumes about how far the country has come politically, particularly because the number of protests has increased significantly since 2010 (p. 150).

Chapter Six, therefore, provides answers to some of the puzzles that the author raises in the introduction. What makes South Korea distinctive is not that activism has risen since forms of political participation other than voting or campaigning for politicians have steadily increased in Western democracies too. Nor is the “democratic deficit” we witness a uniquely Korean phenomenon either. Rather, what makes South Korea’s experience unique compared to countries where older generations vote at higher rates is that younger generations are perhaps more concerned about their inability to influence the government or bring about changes in institutional politics. In that sense then, the reader surmises that youngsters continue to play the vanguard role as the soul of the nation that they have played since 1919.

Substantively, the author should have perhaps considered how policies such as eschewing primaries and national as opposed to local forms of party organization have served as tools to help political elites entrench exclusionary practices. This lack of representation has also resulted in continuity between the authoritarian and democratic periods (Mobrand, 2019). Some other minor stylistic edits would also have help round out the narrative. Electoral systems are not well explained. On p. 110, for example, the author refers to “the full-fledged hybrid election system,” but the meaning of this expression is not clear. I was also wondering why from 2002 to 2004 “the entry of new political parties was blocked” (p. 110). Some terms such as Sangdodong-gye and Donggyodong-gye (p. 136) require definitions.

Finally, it is not clear what romanization system the author uses for Korean names: “dissident students, intellectuals, and progressive Christian” activists, usually referred to as chaeya or dissident intelligentsia (Choi, 1981, p. 128), are referred to as Jaya in the text (p. 16). 이승만’s name is rendered in English as Lee Sung-man (p. 3), Syngman Rhee (p. 8), and Rhee Syngman (p. 14). The author also mentions that “[on May 31, 1948,] Shin Ik-hee and Kim Dong-won were elected vice presidents [of the National Assembly]” (p. 13), but I think what the author meant to say is that they were elected vice chairmen.

These quibbles should not take away from the overall assessment of this review, which is that at 183 pages, Seongyi Yun’s book is a timely assessment of current challenges and opportunities in Korean politics in light of democratic theory and the experience of other rich democracies. Reviewing an impressive array of topics using sources in both Korean and English, the book provides a rich palette of individuals, organizations, and events bringing out what makes Korean democracy so interesting to observers in both Korea and around the world.

References

- Choi, Jang Jip. 1993. "Political Cleavages in South Korea". In *State and Society in Contemporary Korea*, edited by Hagen Koo. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lee, Chong-Sik. 1981. "South Korea in 1980: The Emergence of a New Authoritarian Order". *Asian Survey* 21 (1): 125-143.
- Mobrand, Erik. 2019. *Top-Down Democracy in South Korea*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.



Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>)