

# | The Growth of Democracy in South Korea: A Political Analysis of the Gwangju Uprising & 1980s Democracy Movement

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In the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea underwent a democratic movement, in which the civilians fought against an authoritarian regime in hopes of establishing democracy. The authoritarian regime's rule was oppressive and strict, making every-day life difficult for the average citizen. Students, workers, and women were at the forefront of the movement. Their protests peaked in an event known as the Gwangju Uprising of 1980, in which civilians involved were cracked down upon by the military. Numerous casualties took place. However, even though the Gwangju Uprising may be viewed as a failed protest—this paper argues that the Gwangju Uprising played a pivotal role in the democratization of South Korea. The Uprising provided a sense of motivation for protestors, encouraged more of the public to join in support, and identified weaknesses of previous movements. It is for such reasons that South Korean democracy would become a reality in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Dans les années 70 et 80, il y avait un mouvement démocratique en Corée du Sud, lorsque les civil.e.s luttèrent contre le régime autoritaire, dans l'espoir d'établir la démocratie. Le règne du régime autoritaire était oppressif et strict, ce qui rendait la vie de tous les jours très difficile pour les citoyen.ne.s moyen.ne.s. Les étudiant.e.s, les travailleurs.euses et les femmes étaient au premier plan de ce mouvement. Le soulèvement de Gwangju en 1980 fut l'apogée des manifestations, lorsque l'armée a réprimé les civil.e.s. Il y a eu de nombreuses pertes humaines. Cependant, même si certain.e.s considèrent le soulèvement comme un échec, la présente analyse fait valoir que le soulèvement de Gwangju a joué un rôle essentiel dans la démocratisation de la Corée du Sud. Le soulèvement servait de motivation pour les manifestant.e.s, en ayant encouragé un plus

grand public à y participer et en ayant identifié les points faibles des mouvements précédents. C'est pour de telles raisons que la démocratie de la Corée du Sud a pu se réaliser plus tard dans les années 80 et au début des années 90.

## Introduction

The fight for democracy around the world is of utmost importance, as democracy allows for the people of a state the right to govern themselves, and the ability to therefore determine how their lives will be politically structured. In the case of an authoritarian political system, or dictatorship, this is not so. Being such a significant issue, it is of no surprise that so many countries around the world have held their own unique fights for democracy, while many others continue to strive for the same. South Korea is one such country that has become democratic. In the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea was locked in conflict between the military-led dictatorship and the civilians who demanded the right to live by their own rules in democracy (Ahn 2003, 163). South Korea's fight was long and difficult and peaked in an event known as the Gwangju Uprising. This paper argues that while the Gwangju Uprising is an event which is described by academics as "sad" and "bloody," it was a significant factor leading to South Korea's overall successful transition to democracy (Kim 2003, 231).

This paper will provide a political analysis of the South Korean democracy movement of the 1970s and 1980s. The paper will first cover the context of the movement, looking at its social and political background, as well as the political aims of the participants. It will also define the exact objectives of the movement, providing a more concise image of the democracy that South Korea wished to achieve. Then, the paper will look at the political decisions made by protests within the movement, and the government response to such decisions. Finally, the paper will conclude by analyzing the outcome, long-term impact, and significance of the movement.

## The regime: South Korea's political history leading to the democracy movement

In 1980, from May 18 to May 27, crowds of people in South Korea gathered in the city of Gwangju to protest martial law and the authoritarian government that they felt was oppressing them (Ahn 2003, 163; Kim 2003, 225). A short summary of the Gwangju Uprising as provided by historian and author Jean Ahn states that it was "the struggle of democratic forces against the violent suppression by monopolistic capitalist classes subordinate to a global capitalist system." (162). During a ten-day demonstration, during which civilians intended to remain peaceful, the military arrived and conducted a massacre of anyone involved in the opposition (Kim 2003,

225). Though this event, later known as the Gwangju Uprising, was a failure in its goal of abolishing martial law, it became a symbol of civilian power, “establishing the principle of civilian supremacy during the democratic transition period” (Kim 2003, 225). Perhaps most importantly, it arguably contributed to the overall success of obtaining democracy in South Korea (Kim 2003, 225; Na 2003, 177).

## Contextual factors of the democracy movement: authoritarianism & economic unrest

The time leading up to this defining moment of South Korean history was harsh and challenging for South Korean civilians. In 1961, the military performed a coup that harmed democracy in South Korea (Kim 2003, 228). Following this coup, South Korea lived under an oppressive authoritarian government regime, known as Yushin under the lead of Dictator Park Jeong Hee (Kim 2003, 229). Prior to Park Jeong Hee’s rise, South Korea was extremely politically turbulent (Lee 1993, 353). Any democratic institutions, such as transparent and fair governmental elections that may have previously existed before his rise to power became more and more scarce until they disappeared entirely (Park 2003, 265). This authoritarian regime held a very high political capacity, referring to its ability to penetrate into civilians’ daily activities. Accordingly, the citizens had limited control over their own lives, such as the ability to freely express any dissent against the government due to extensive censorship laws. (Tarrow and Tilly 2015, 57). Nonetheless, South Korea during this era did experience a large amount of economic growth (Ahn 2003, 164). However, this economic growth was extremely segregated between the ruling and working classes, and many within the working classes were suffering under strict labour standards—including poor working conditions and low wages. (Ahn 2003, 165). However, following Park Jeong Hee’s assassination in 1979, there was a resulting power vacuum creating a new era of political turbulence (Ahn 2003, 168; Kim 2003, 230). In the same year, the military performed yet another coup on December 12th, managing to take full control of the country (Kim 2003, 230). With this development, Military Jeon Doo Hwan, a key figure in the inner military coup ruled as leader of the country (Park 2003, 265). He reorganized the government, held the country under tight martial law, and suppressed the South Korean people’s ability to exercise political and social freedom. Jeon Doo Hwan came to power and his creation of a supposed ‘hybrid’ regime in which elections took place but were corrupt under the existing Constitution, led to the beginning of the mobilization for democracy (Lee 1993, 355). Nonetheless, there was no such ‘hybrid’ aspect to his rule: rather, his rule was entirely authoritarian in nature. Through a combination of the lack of democracy and the worsening economic conditions for workers, the South Korean democratic movement began in the late 1970s and continued into the late 1980s.

## Breakdown of the democracy movement

### Goals

The goals of the Democracy Movement were relatively simple - first and foremost, protestors wanted the installment of democracy into their government and country (Kim 2003, 229). The second most significant goal was the demolition of the financial gap between the ruling and working classes, and a redistribution of resources (Ahn 2003, 163; The Guardian, 2020).

While specific polling data is unavailable for the Yushin regime, the literature suggests most citizens felt that the Yushin regime lacked democratic legitimacy (Lee 1993 353). Protestors asked for fair, direct elections and the immediate dismantling of the Martial Law the government imposed (Ahn 2003, 163). They also asked for the right to political opposition (Kim 2003, 229). In this period, any political opposition detected was quickly, and often violently, shut down (Kim 2003, 239). This also went for those who protested strict labor laws (Park 2005 264). Overall, the protestors fought for a form of 'civilian first' political structure (Kim 2003, 240).

In relation to the financial gap, protestors asked for the end of the monopoly which the ruling class held over finances and much of resource distribution, such as food and medical supplies. (Park 2005, 265). They also asked for better working conditions, the increase of wages, labour unions, and inter-workplace democratization (Lee 1993, 353). Inter-workplace democratization refers to the application of democratic institutions (such as the ability of workers to vote, voice their concerns, and make appeals to employers) within the workplace (Timnings and Summers 2020, 710). There is also noted to be a positive correlation between the implementation of inter-workplace democratization, and promotion of democratic ideals by employees in the political realm as well (Timnings and Summers 2020, 720).

### Role of workers and students

A number of social actors played a role in the Democracy Movement. These included industrial workers, white-collar workers, sectors within the military, intellectuals, students, and conservative-opposed politicians (Lee 1993 353). Many of the white-collar workers who lived in urban areas were highly educated and professionally skilled (Lee 1993, 354). University students, who have traditionally played a large front-line role in previous South Korean social movements, once again took up their role (Park 2005, 267).

These protestors are arguably a clear example of the allegiant/assertive protestor model (Welzel and Dalton 2016, 115). As previously mentioned, though South Korea was living in an authoritarian regime and later a hybrid regime, economic growth rose dramatically. South Korean citizens were exposed to a new level of modernization, and with it felt that their labour

should be appropriately compensated, and at the very minimum, reformed with better workplace policies (Welzel and Dalton 2016, 113-123). However, they were far from compensated, as the economic divide between the ruling and working class continued to become larger and more distinct (Ahn 2003, 166). It is also important to note that during the Yushin period, Korea had both the longest working hours in the world and some of the poorest working conditions (Ahn 2003, 166). The working-class citizens who were previously more allegiant therefore became more assertive and began to join protests as a means of demanding their rights which continued to deteriorate (Welzel and Dalton 2016 114).

Interestingly, it was not the workers who first began the democratic movement against the Yushin regime, but the university students, who often held pro-democratic ideals relating to academic freedom and improved workers' rights. South Korean students have often historically been found at the forefront of political protests. Through their dedication and passion, they gained widespread support from the working class (Lee 1993, 355). This combination of worker and student became the central leading organizational group of the social movement (Lee 1993, 355).

### Role of women

Women are an often-forgotten part of the Democracy Movement (Kang 2003, 194). As the movement became more organized and prominent in the city of Gwangju, women also became systemized in their actions (Kang 2003, 197). Songbakho, a women's organization in Gwangju, began to host small-group studies focused on politically educating any who came on their rights, and the mistreatment they suffered at the hands of the government (Kang 2003, 198). Furthermore, in the beginning of the ten-day uprising, women were a significant part of the street demonstrations and public activities, doing things such as distributing flyers, hosting broadcasts, and organizing rallies (Kang 2003, 200). Women also took care of providing food and resources for front-line protestors (Kang 2003, 199). Kang suggests that this protest may not have been able to take place if not for the under-appreciated support of women (2003, 204).

### Organization

Leading up to the Gwangju Uprising, students created numerous specialized groups. Some focused on discovering why previous movements failed, while others were focused on the mobilization and collectivity of the working class (Tarrow and Tilly 2015, 49).

A student group known as 'hakchul' would infiltrate factories as a means of directly speaking to workers and organizing unions and strikes (Park 2005, 275). Others went to the countryside, to volunteer and engage with farmers and other poor workers (Park 2005, 276). Student unions focused on educating the mass population on labour rights, often through night

schools (Park 2005, 278). Faced with harsh political oppression, students were forced into utilizing informal, and sometimes illegal, networks such as study sessions, or cultural clubs for singing and dance (Park 2005, 280). These cultural clubs were also used in connecting with traditional repertoires— 'mandanggeuk' (public plays), 'talchum' (masked dancing), and 'pungmul' (folk dancing) were all used as ways of promoting political consciousness in the general public (Park 2005, 283). Traditional arts and music were also used to spread information about the economic conditions of the country (Park 2005, 283).

## The Gwangju Uprising and massacre

As a result of its spontaneity, the Gwangju Uprising was unorganized in its initial stages. (Na 2003, 178). It began when student protestors were asked to leave the front gate of Chonnam National University by police and refused (Na 2003, 178). When these students were physically and violently removed by the police and military, resulting in many injuries, workers and regular townspeople of Gwangju became angered (Na 2003, 178). Groups of people protested in front of police stations, which later grew to fill entire streets of Gwangju (Na 2003, 179). Though this event was spontaneous, it became an event of collective action between students and the regular townspeople (Na 2003, 179). From the first day on, thousands of people continued to join the protests and demonstrations, which took over nearly the entire city (Na 2003, 180). Part of the reason for this large-scale collectivism was the outrage over the inhumane treatment of the college students at the university (Na 2003, 180). State violence as a form of motivation for radicalization and mobilization of supporters was present in the Gwangju Uprising, due to the collective emotion of the people. Emotion, presenting itself through grief, sorrow, and a hope for justice, played an important role in motivating the people, allowing for great dedication and self-sacrifice (Na 2003, 184). Anyone who was opposed to the Yushin Regime and Martial Law was seen as a member and comrade of the movement, united together by their shared political grievances and resistance to authoritarian rule in the face of economic scarcity (Na 2003, 181, 184). Later into the Uprising, more defined groups began to emerge, such as specialized study groups, women's groups of support, and project organizational groups (Na 2003, 181).

## Governmental response and result

The response of the government to the various protests was usually harsh and determined. The methods undertaken made use of large-scale violence as a means of quickly shutting down any opposition (Na 2003, 265).

The first military coup was justified by the military as a necessary event in order to promote and enhance South Korean economic growth (Kim 2003, 228). Even though there were those who spoke out against the poor economic conditions suffered by the workers, their

complaints were ultimately ignored in favour of the grand, prosperous, overall picture the government proclaimed.

The second coup was justified by Park Jeong Hee's emphasis of the need for stability and maintenance within the regime (Kim 2003, 228). His response towards political opposition followed the historical pattern leading up to his rule; he would quickly call-in troops to deal with any kind of significant political opposition (Kim 2003, 228; Na 2003, 265).

The Yushin regime was ultimately Park Jeong Hee's answer to increasing political opposition and protests. The Yushin regime was stronger in its authoritarian policies than the previous regimes had been, and essentially all democratic values were dismantled (Kang 2003, 197). The people were faced with few legal or formal ways of making their complaints heard. Political movements and activities were entirely banned, and the press became highly censored (Kim 2003, 230). Martial law was fully embedded within the government (Kang 2003, 197). Furthermore, Park Jeong Hee also created the Hanahoe: a set of secret, elite military soldiers, dispatched to eliminate protesters when necessary (Kim 2003, 229). With all of these measures in place, it is evident that political protests faced many difficulties in rising and maintaining themselves. (Kim 2003, 230). While it cannot be said in absolute terms why the Gwangju Uprising managed to take place whereas other protests did not, many feel that it is in part due to the location of Gwangju, within South Jeolla province. South Jeolla province has historically been a location of great political defiance and protest.

The Gwangju Uprising was immensely violent. The students and regular townspeople who protested in the streets were quickly attacked by soldiers operating under martial law, who made little effort to distinguish between protestors and uninvolved citizens (Ahn 2003, 163). Many people were attacked with batons or simply beaten and stripped (Na 2003, 179). The Gwangju Uprising peaked from May 18 to May 21, when the soldiers, later, reinforcements, conducted a massacre against the protestors with guns (Na, 2003 179). Anywhere from 200 to 2000 people were killed, thousands were injured, and even more were arrested (Kim 2003, 232). These people included civilians, students, police, and soldiers. Due to the disorderly nature of the Gwangju Uprising, it has been impossible to determine any universally agreed-upon number of casualties. It is clear that as the Gwangju Uprising was a mass, chaotic, large-scale event, the reaction of the government was similarly large and chaotic. The protest was forcefully cracked down upon (Na 2003, 177).

With the ending of the Gwangju Uprising, the government sealed its rule by creating the Special Committee for National Security Measures, which portrayed the Gwangju Uprising in the media as a reckless attack orchestrated by communist sympathizers (Kim 2003, 232). The Special Committee also organized widespread "clean-ups", in which thousands of people suspected to be involved in the protests were fired from their jobs and/or arrested (Kim 2003, 232).



## Long-term impact of the Gwangju Uprising

The political protests and Democratization Movement came to a head with the Gwangju Uprising. The Gwangju Uprising, though it ended in failure, was of vital importance to the overall successful establishment of democracy and civil society (Lee 1993, 359). This event was not historically isolated and can be viewed as part of the extended Democratization Movement (Ahn 2003, 159). In a sense, the Gwangju Uprising may be understood as a key, critical event of the overall democracy movement. Ironically, though it is perhaps the most unorganized and reactionary event of the democracy movement, it is simultaneously the most impactful as it functioned as a future source of motivation for those continuing to protest. The massacre which took place functioned as a source of new motivation for protestors against the regime (Kim 2003, 233). Students and protestors were put into a position that required them to examine past democratic movements and identify what their strengths and limits were, and what prevented them from ultimate success (Kim 2003, 233). They were able to determine that the connections between protestors were of utmost importance—in particular, the power held in ‘minjung’ (grass-roots people) (Kim 2003, 233; Park 2005, 274). It was necessary not only to bridge gaps between students and workers but all sectors of South Korean society-at-large (Lee 1993, 355). “Nation, democracy, and minjung” became key terms following the Gwangju Uprising, which created a sense of joint resistance among the various sectors of Korean society (Park 2005, 275). In this way, South Korean protestors not only greatly expanded their numbers but also adopted a more radical ideology of not only removing the military regime but reshaping the government entirely, for the Gwangju Uprising clearly revealed the government’s flaws (Park 2005, 267). Therefore, it is possible to see that success can be ambiguously defined in this case (Gupta 2017, 246). Even though the protests leading up to the Gwangju Uprising and Gwangju Uprising itself met a violent end, their lasting impact helped to shape society in a legitimate and necessary manner (Gupta 2017, 249, 250).

### June uprising

This is especially seen in the late 1980s. In popular academic opinion, the Gwangju Uprising is said to be the direct reason and cause for the June Uprising of 1987 (Kim 2003, 234). In 1987, due to reinvigorated mass societal and political unrest, later known as the June Uprising, a “Special Declaration” was declared by the government, which consisted of a direct presidential election (Lee 1993 356). The South Korean government ultimately reached a breaking point in which the military regime could not uphold itself against the continued protests of society. This year is extremely important in South Korean history, as it marks the reinstatement of democracy and civil society in South Korea (Park 2005, 262). Roh Tae Woo, chairman of the Democratic Justice Party was elected president (Kim 2003, 235; Lee 1993, 356). The Democratic Justice Party also merged with the Reunification Democratic Party (Kim 2003,



236). Under the leadership of the new joint party, the Korean political regime began to undergo mass reorganization. This included strong measures of liberalization, such as freedom of the press, and local political autonomy—namely, the right to local elections (Lee 1993, 357). Political protest and oppression also became tolerated, and many took the opportunity to ask for better policies concerning the economy and labour (Lee 1993, 356). This reorganization resulted in a great loss of state capacity in favour of citizen involvement and power (Lee, 1993 357; Tarrow and Tilly 2015, 57). The following President Kim Young Sam also abolished the Hanahoe and introduced measures to depoliticize military leaders (Kim 2003, 237).

## Conclusion

South Korea is an example of a successful transition to democracy. South Korea has shown little to no evidence of reverting to authoritarian rule, and remains democratic in nature in the present day (Kim 2003, 225).

The Democratization Movement is valuable in that the Gwangju Uprising provides us with an opportunity to determine what one may mean by “success”. There is no right answer as to whether the Gwangju Uprising and its massacre justify the implementation of democracy. Many lives were lost, and thousands more forever changed.

Overall, the Democratization Movement and Gwangju Uprising are important to the study of protest politics because it allows us as a global society to learn from our mistakes, examine our concerns, and continue to improve upon our structures of government and political regimes.

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