

# South Korea Is Not In Democratic Backslide (Yet)

Written by Lauren Doeff

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LAUREN DOEFF, JUL 5 2022

In the wake of South Korea's presidential election, an election rife with mudslinging and unpopular candidates, international rhetoric has begun proclaiming this as the "democratic backslide" of South Korea. However, South Korea's 2022 election is evidence of the separation between democratic institutional and social development. Although often understood as working in tandem, the election of Yoon Seok-Yeol is demonstrative of the overall strength of South Korea's democratic institutions, despite an undeniable potential for the degradation of social development and equality. Only when both institutional and social development degrades can one claim a democratic backslide. Furthermore, in the South Korean development context social and civic development act as necessary preconditions for democratic institutional development, this can therefore inform the causal sequence of South Korean development across all spheres.

The issue at hand is the causal chain that allows us to see and claim a possible democratic backslide. Due to the theatrics of the election and fears for the future, the results of the 2022 election seem to spell certain doom for South Korean development due to the conflation of institutional and social development/degradation as a single variable, or rather the understanding that institutional *and* social degradation lead to democratic backslide. However, by conflating these two elements we will lose the crucial nuance and detail in identifying what is changing and why. Rather, the current case should be understood as potential social degradation that can *lead to* institutional degradation, which then in turn leads to democratic backsliding. The following diagram shows this difference:

*[Institutional and Social Degradation] → Potential Democratic Backslide*  
*[Social Degradation] → [Institutional Degradation] → Potential Democratic Backslide*

Decisively dividing social and institutional development into two distinct steps towards democratic backslide in the South Korean context not only clarifies how and when developmental changes impact the political landscape but also offers a decisive indicator that can be used to push back against potential degradation and democratic backslide. Since social degradation is a necessary precondition for institutional degradation it can be used as an early warning sign to better judge the health of South Korea's democracy.

### South Korea's Democratic Developmental Path

South Korea's democratic and development history is often invoked as one of the ultimate success stories, rising from a war-torn country with a struggling economy to a technologically advanced country with a top ten economy — known as the Miracle on the Han River. However, within this exponential economic development lies a key division between spheres of development. Although the economy was rapidly expanding this came at the expense of democratic and social development in South Korea. From 1961-1988 South Korea was ruled under two authoritarian regimes, that of Park Chung Hee (in office 1961-1979) and Chun Doo-Hwan (in office 1979-1988).[1] Under these regimes the export-oriented economy was solidified and expanded, conglomerate companies were established and gained power through preferential government contracts, and state-building efforts were undertaken in an attempt to strengthen the state and its position both regionally and internationally. However, simultaneous to this rapid economic development was social and civic stagnation; South Korean citizens were heavily censored, lacked legitimate elections, and lived in fear of violent government crackdowns and martial law up until the democratic uprisings of the '80s that began a new era of governance.[2] Through this division, we can see the inherent divide between social and

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institutional development in South Korea, and the role of civic and social development as a foundational element of institutional development.

In the ashes of South Korean authoritarianism emerges the foundation of current South Korean democracy. This is first demonstrated through the fall of the Chun regime in 1988 due to civilian pressure for free elections, a gambit that only succeeded due to the government's fear of widespread protests and revolt so close to their hosting of the 1988 Seoul Olympics.<sup>[3]</sup> The end of authoritarianism in South Korea is undeniably the result of the strength of civil society and civic engagement separate from the state. This engagement led to the ability to create democratic institutions in South Korea, and thus demonstrates the causal nature of social development in the process of institutional development. The South Korean democratization process, and the role of civic engagement, was a necessary step for democratic institutions to be established.

## Institutional Strength: Success of Democratic Institutions

In discussing the arguable democratic backslide of South Korea we must also carefully consider the recent political history to accurately determine the current position and strength of South Korean democratic institutions. In very recent history, South Korean elections and domestic politics took a tumultuous turn, beginning with the 2017 impeachment of former president Park Geun-Hye. Park, daughter of former authoritarian leader Park Chung-Hee, was caught in a shockingly large-scale corruption scandal arising from accusations of undue influence from an unofficial advisor, accusations of illegally procuring and extorting money from her ties to the conglomerates, and using illicit funds and bribery to further her daughter's collegiate equestrian career.<sup>[4]</sup> Park's impeachment and further arrest led to the election of progressive Moon Jae-In, a politician who came in expected to alleviate domestic economic woes but who is exiting the office in a cloud of disappointment and resentment in the wake of the ongoing housing crisis and a general lack of progress on promised issues. This is *not*, however, evidence of democratic backslide. If anything, recent political history shows otherwise.

Despite these setbacks and discontent from the public, the South Korean democratic institutions have so far held firm. From recent history, this is first seen in the efficiency and institutional strength during the impeachment proceedings of former Park. Under the South Korean constitution, an impeachment requires a two-thirds majority of the legislative National Assembly Branch (200 out of 300), followed by a ruling from the Constitutional Court to determine whether Park was guilty of what the charges claimed.<sup>[5]</sup> The strength of South Korea's democratic institutions is seen through this process. First, the success of the National Assembly's impeachment proceedings was only possible because members of Park's own party voted against her, demonstrating the importance of democratic institutions over bipartisan politics. This is further seen in the courts, with the 2017 Constitutional Court being stacked in Park's favor — six of the nine judges were appointed by Park — but still voting to uphold the impeachment.<sup>[6]</sup> Despite an instance of corruption, South Korea's democratic institutions held firm.

The strength of Korean institutions is also demonstrated through the consistency and legitimacy of electoral and voting procedures, specifically free and fair elections and peaceful transitions of power. President Moon's election went off mostly without a hitch, but the true strength of these electoral systems came through in the results of this year's 2022 election. The two candidates, Yoon Seok-Yeol of the conservative People's Power Party and Lee Myung-Jae of the Democratic Party, who were neck-and-neck for most of the highly divisive election, were able to conclude the election seamlessly and peacefully. The opportunities for institutional degradation were rife, largely due to how close the votes were. Yoon ended the election with 48.4% of the vote while Lee was a close second with 47.8% of the vote, creating the real potential for people to attempt to de-legitimize the election results, or lead to a chaotic transfer of power due to the controversies surrounding Yoon during the campaign trail.<sup>[7]</sup> However, this was not the case. Rather, Lee conceded gracefully, and the transition of power, although a little rocky, is peaceful and on schedule — which is more than powerful democracies such as the United States can say for their own elections. The potential for institutional degradation has been present at essentially every turn of recent South Korean politics, but the conscious rejection and precedence of democratic institutions over individual gains has maintained the strength and integrity of their democratic institutions.

## Social Degradation: The Plague of Anti-feminism

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Let us keep in mind that although South Korea is strong institutionally, it is social degradation that ultimately leads to institutional degradation and potential democratic backsliding. Despite institutional strengths, South Korea is already in the midst of large-scale social degradation, in the form of rising anti-feminism. Anti-feminism is an already existing dilemma in South Korea, but throughout the 2022 presidential election, it rose in prominence due to Yoon's co-option of the ideology to win over the younger male voting demographics. Feminism has become a demonized ideology within South Korea, although South Korean feminism itself differs from the development of western feminism, starting later with more radical ideologies constantly in contention with the traditional and male-dominated aspects of South Korean culture and society.<sup>[8]</sup>

The hatred against feminism is largely rooted in the same political issues that have been discussed earlier, non-viable housing markets and growing unemployment are not just societal issues, they are believed to be the result of women taking a larger role in education and the economy, "stealing" these roles and opportunities from their male counterparts. Furthermore, the perceived unfairness of the male-only mandatory conscription system exacerbates these issues. This is manifesting itself in the form of Yoon Seok-Yeol, a candidate who has overtly supported anti-feminist ideas and potential policies and enticed scores of young men to support him.

With this, it is clear to see that the social degradation of South Korea is undeniable. Yoon's inflammatory platform is coming at a time when gendered social inequality is already distressingly high. According to the OECD report on Korea, the gendered pay gap was 32.5% (meaning women earned that much less), the highest gap among all OECD countries<sup>[9]</sup>. This is happening simultaneously to a cultural landscape that is rife with issues such as secret cameras recording women without their consent in public spaces, a lack of empathy and social stigma against sexual assault and gender-based violence, and an overall position of inferiority pushed onto Korean women.<sup>[10]</sup>

## Back to the Model

When viewed through the model presented earlier in this piece it appears that South Korea is skirting a precarious line. Despite institutional strength, social degradation is already in motion, meaning that the potential for institutional decay during Yoon's term is possible if his anti-feminist agenda manifests itself institutionally, such as Yoon's plan to abolish the Ministry of Women. However, at this current time, the only claims that can be made are those that can be backed up with evidence, not future hypotheticals. Therefore, although the threat of institutional degradation is arguably rising, until the decisive weakening of South Korea's institutions it is *not* a democratic backslide.

## Conclusion

It may seem completely foolish to be nose-deep in the semantics of theory when, despite a questionable platform and a slew of inflammatory and unprofessional statements throughout the campaign, there are no guarantees for any politician to carry out their platform, especially given the Democratic majority in South Korea's National Assembly currently. Much of this international fear seems to be a reactionary response to America's Trump years, with broad comparisons being made between Trump and Yoon as both being inexperienced populists that will bring the end of legitimate democracy. As the world reconciles with the legacy of Trump this fear is valid, but it seems rather unsporting to condemn a politician who has not yet taken office for the hypothetical actions he may take in the future. As scholars of international affairs and development are wont to forget: we are professionals, not oracles, and any doomsday claims made before Yoon officially takes office are merely an exercise in conjecture. Yoon may yet prove to be an enemy of democracy, and likely will, but until that point, the only thing to do is wait.

## Notes

<sup>[1]</sup> Park Chong-Min, "Authoritarian Rule in South Korea: Political Support and Governmental Performance," 745-750

<sup>[2]</sup> David Black & Shona Bezanson, "The Olympic Games, Human Rights and Democratisation: Lessons from Seoul and Implications for Beijing," 1245

<sup>[3]</sup> Black, Bezanson, "The Olympic Games, Human Rights and Democratisation," 1246

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[4] Jamie Douette, "The Occult of Personality: Korea's Candlelight Protests and the Impeachment of Park Geun-Hye," 855-860

[5] Constitution of the Republic of Korea, 12 July 1948, <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b4dd14.html>

[6] Jack Kim, Park Ju-Min, "If impeached, South Korean President's Fate in the Hand of Nine judges," Reuters

[7] Statista, "South Korea: 20th Presidential Election Results 2022"

[8] Park, Kyung Ae. "Women and Development: The Case of South Korea." *Comparative Politics* 25, no. 2 (1993): 127-45.

[9] Yang Hyunsoo, "South Korea Has Come a Long Way But Has Longer to Go," (2019) OECD Report

[10] Palley, Marian Lief. "Women's Status in South Korea: Tradition and Change." *Asian Survey* 30, no. 12 (1990): 1136-5

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