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KOREA'S DEMOCRATIZATION

The Republic of Korea is regarded as a shining example of democracy in East Asia. Despite this significant achievement, Korea's democracy in practice has been plagued by political gridlock, severe factional infighting, a lack of social capital and cooperation between civil society and political institutions, and leadership behavior that calls to mind its authoritarian past. Although the country is now a secure electoral democracy, its journey toward democratic consolidation is far from complete. In this volume, some of the best scholars on Korean politics explore and assess the complex interplay of the facilitating and inhibiting factors that have influenced and reshaped Korea's democratic consolidation process at all levels of state and society, as well as the prospects for consolidation in the coming years.

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Preface

Since the late 1980s, the Republic of Korea (ROK, or hereafter “Korea”), a formerly war-ravaged country, has acquired a scintillating dual identity as an East Asian model of economic prosperity and political democracy. Korea also became the first third-wave democracy in East Asia to transfer power peacefully to an opposition party, in early 1998. Despite the country’s brief but checkered history, with no less than nine constitutional amendments and three aborted democratic openings between 1948 and 1988, Korea has made significant progress toward establishing pluralistic governing institutions and protecting the political and civil liberties of its citizens.

Although there is little doubt that Korea is now a secure electoral democracy, with electoral politics the only game in town, its journey toward democratic consolidation is far from complete. Much work and reform is still needed to consolidate Korea’s democracy. The legacy of authoritarianism, deeply entrenched Confucian values, and regional factionalism are among the variety of forces continuously testing the newly established democratic procedures and institutions. Moreover, the country’s limited experience in democracy thus far has provided little time for democratic norms and values to take root among the citizens and for necessary sociopolitical reforms to develop a more transparent, accountable, and responsive government.

The focal point of this study is Korea’s democratic consolidation, defined as a multidimensional and multicausal process. Working from this definition, this project seeks to explore how Korea’s democracy has deepened in all the key dimensions of political life – cultural, behavioral, and institutional – and at various levels of state and society – mass public, intermediate civil society, and government. What specific cultural, behavioral, and institutional characteristics distinguish Korean-style

democracy? What are the major challenges for a fully consolidated liberal democracy in Korea – the possibilities and limitations of normative and behavioral transformation? What are the main obstacles standing in the way of transforming Korean electoral democracy into a more responsible, representative, effective, liberal democracy? How long would it take for Korea to achieve such democratic deepening and maturing? Each contributor was asked to address some of these questions and to do so within the framework of a specific assigned topic; no particular theory or methodology was privileged in advance.

The book is organized into four parts. The first part (chapter 1) considers, in broad strokes, how the turbulent and often paradoxical force of globalization has impacted and reshaped the context and condition under which Korea's democratic consolidation could take place. The second part (chapter 2) examines how democratic reforms in the past decade have transformed the attitudes and opinions of Korean citizens toward liberal democracy and the government. The third part (chapters 3–5) looks at Korea's civil society and how civil society groups, which had an antagonistic function during the authoritarian era, have adapted to the democratic state and have adopted a more supportive role, or have failed to do so. Finally, the fourth part (chapters 6–9) critically examines recent developments at the state/governmental level, specifically how regionalism, constitutional politics, civil–military relations, and the institutional drag of the Korean developmental state have helped or hindered the country's democratic consolidation process.

This project was born out of a major research conference under the auspices of the Center for Korean Research of Columbia University's East Asian Institute. The event was held May 25–26, 2001, at Columbia University, where contributors and participants engaged in a fruitful exchange of ideas and opinions about the progress and prospects of Korea's democratization. I would like to thank the chapter contributors for their originality, hard work, and patience in meeting the high demands of this project. Moreover, this project, like many previous research endeavors sponsored by the Center, would not have been possible without the continuous and generous moral and financial support of the Korea Foundation.

In addition, I would also like to express my gratitude to the Center for Korean Research and the East Asian Institute, especially my graduate student research assistant – Abraham Kim – for his characteristically skillful, efficient, and multitasking work in the library and online research, and for stage-managing the preparation of the book manuscript.

Finally, it was a pleasure to work with Cambridge University Press in the production of this book. In the course of the peer-review and vetting process, two anonymous readers provided very helpful and perceptive

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PREFACE

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comments and suggestions for improving and updating the chapters to take more fully into account the changes and continuities in Korea's democratic consolidation process. I am particularly grateful to Mary Child for her unflagging support and encouragement and for her role as an invaluable navigator throughout the publication process. Special thanks are due to Adriane Gelpi and Zachary Dorsey for their efficient steering of the manuscript through the various stages of production. The usual disclaimer still applies: the editor and chapter authors alone are responsible for any remaining errors in facts or interpretation.

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