

# Revisiting the Democratic Transition in South Korea and Taiwan

Nawar Kassomeh  
Lancaster University, United Kingdom  
E-mail: n.kassomeh@lancaster.ac.uk; nawarkass@gmail.com

## Article History

**Received:** 15 July 2021

**Revised:** 9 November 2021

**Published:** 16 November 2021

## Abstract

This paper explores the transition to democracy in Taiwan and South Korea, as two East-Asian countries which have moved successfully away from authoritarian rule. These two East-Asian states are particularly noteworthy to students of democratic transition because of nature of their previous authoritarian regimes as well as their Confucian cultural values were not compatible with democratic value. Despite this, the democratic transition in both countries was reached with peaceful transition. Entering the third decade after the democratic transition, their democracy is not, however, fully consolidated and both countries are facing political turbulences; nevertheless, the people in both countries seem determined to move forward democratically. Therefore, their experience is useful for countries elsewhere which are experiencing the transition from authoritarianism; specifically, South Korea and Taiwan provide a model for how other countries might move to democracy.

**Keywords:** South Korea, Taiwan, Democracy, East Asia, Democratic Consolidation

## Introduction

The East Asian modern states have witnessed large-scale economic, social and financial developments in the last three decades or so. Indeed, it may not be an exaggeration to say that they have achieved economic miracles, while maintaining high growth rates. This evolution has helped states such as South Korea and Taiwan to adopt Western-style democracy and instigate the building of a strong welfare system.

Both South Korea and Taiwan represent powerful case studies for scholars who are interested in global transitions to democracy. Moreover, the importance of studying Taiwan and, to an extent, South Korea lies in the way they have managed to bypass opposition and non-democratic forces in order to transform their regimes gradually and peacefully. There is a common claim that, similar to Islam, Asian values are incompatible with democracy. And yet, the cases of South Korea and Taiwan refute such claims.

In fact, South Korea and Taiwan are considered to be the most solid democracies in East Asia. For instance, it is purported that the South Koreans regard democracy positively; moreover, military officers in South Korea no longer intervene in the political life of this country (Ginsburg, 2008). Additionally, South Korea and Taiwan are both well developed and industrialized countries with close ties to the West. Thus, it is useful to analyze their democratic experience in depth, to see whether there is a relationship between democracy and their economy. Did democracy come to these two countries because they had achieved a certain level of economic success? Can economic wealth maintain democracy in these two countries? For instance, some scholars argue that democracy in Taiwan and South Korea is safe because no democracy with such high levels of GDP and GNI per capita has collapsed before (Zhu et al., 2001).

**Citation Information:** Kassomeh, N. (2021). Revisiting the Democratic Transition in South Korea and Taiwan. *Asian Political Science Review*, 5(1), 1-12.  
<https://doi.org/10.14456/apsr.2021.1>

Equally, the Third Wave of democracy started in early 1970s though the 1980s when about eighty counties, including South Korea and Taiwan, became involved in social and political reforms that aimed to lead the states into democratic transition by having free competitive elections and by widening political freedoms (Sin and Wells, 2005). This paper will analyze the internal and external factors that have led to the success of the democratic transition in South Korea and Taiwan, two cases of the so called the Third Wave. A second and equally important aim of this paper is to analyse the economic factors and the possible external danger of these newly established democracies - mainly with regards to conflicts with China in the case of Taiwan, and with North Korea in the case South Korea. It asks whether democracy, in either case, is hindering a possible settlement between the two Koreas or between China and Taiwan. Lastly, the paper will examine the consolidation of the democracy in the two countries.

## **Democratic Transition**

In 1986, the late Taiwanese president Chiang Ching-kua began a series of reforms to launch a democratic transition in Taiwan. In the same period, South Korean presidents Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo ignited similar political reforms to move toward democracy under popular pressure (Hsieh, 2000). Hence, the transition to democracy happened in both South Korea and Taiwan in the same period of time. Moreover, the comparison between states is inviting because they share certain similarities. However, unlike Taiwan's experience, change in South Korea was mostly driven by continuous and large-scale protests and the elites' concerns about the success of the upcoming Olympic Games to be held in 1988 (Jacobs, 2007). The following sections will consider the transition to democracy of each country in more detail.

### **Taiwan**

The first country that followed the Third Wave of democracy in East Asia was Taiwan. Some scholars attribute the successful democratic transition to the extraordinary ability of the opposition groups to ease the repression of the ruling elites and force them to smoothly adopt a new policy without violent confrontation. These middle-class opposition groups were the consequence of the rapid economic growth and they differ from the Mainlander elites by virtue of the fact that they were intellectuals, lawyers, and young entrepreneurs influenced by Western ideals (Cheng, 1989). Hence, Mainlanders started to redistribute political power in order to guarantee larger space to the native Taiwanese (Tien and Chu, 1996). In fact, the nationalist leaders (Mainlanders) believed that the top-down democratic approach would give them legitimacy to pursue their nationalist identity; the opposition was comprised of Taiwanese whose ancestors had existed before 1945 and these opposition leaders wanted to enforce the Taiwanese identity and an independent Taiwan (Phillips, 2016). Therefore, from the 1980s until 2000, Taiwan began the process of democratic transformation after being ruled by the KMT (The Kuomintang) for four decades (Phillips, 2016). The KMT adopted a successful strategic policy by encouraging native Taiwanese to join the party. Thus, by the mid-1980s, almost half of the Central Standing Committee and three quarters of the party members were native Taiwanese. This is considered a remarkable effort to reduce tensions between social groups and as a sign that the mainlanders were willing to slowly integrate the native Taiwanese into the political game (Cheng, 1989).

Nonetheless, the first real step towards democratic transition was initiated in 1986 by President Chiang Ching-Kuo, as a response to the new Chinese market-oriented policy adopted by Chinese president Deng Xiaoping. Accordingly, Taiwan started political reform that aims to encourage political participation. President Chiang believed that by transforming Taiwan into a democratic state, it would help democratize China - Taiwan would become a model that the Chinese might imitate in the future. Thus, he declared that he would make

people equal before law, established a constitutional democratic government and gave political power to the Taiwanese (Ginsburg, 2008). Additionally, in 1987, the martial law ended, and then in 1992 Taiwan witnessed the first legislative elections (Bailey, 2020). Soon after this remarkable evolution, the Taiwanese government allowed there to be opposition parties (Ginsburg, 2008). It was the KMT's strong leader Lee Teng-hui who was behind lifting the martial law and the first elected national assembly for the first time since the one elected 40 years ago in mainland China. These reforms were finally followed by the first presidential election in 1996 (Tsai et al., 2008), and Lee became the first democratically elected president of Taiwan (Ginsburg, 2008). In the 2000s, democracy in Taiwan reached its climax when it witnessed the first peaceful transition of power in Chinese history, paving the way for the leader of the newly formed opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), Chen Shui-bian to become the second democratically elected president of Taiwan. Consequently, many scholars interpreted this peaceful transition as a sign that democracy in Taiwan was no longer in danger (Tien and Chu, 1996; Ginsburg, 2008). By 2001 DPP was also able to win the legislative election and KMT was forced to completely hand over power (Phillips, 2016). As a result, DPP used its electoral victory to promote the Taiwanese national identity and to reformulate education, language and policies to strengthen Taiwanese identity while maintaining a pragmatic approach on the issue of independence from China (Phillips, 2016).

### **South Korea**

Unlike Taiwan, before the transition to democracy there had been a short-lived period of democratic government in South Korea (1960-1961) when the students succeeded in their revolt against the regime of Syngman Rhee (Hsieh, 2000). However, similarly to Taiwan, the democratic transition in South Korea was marked by a historical movement, that is, the "People Power" movement which began in 1987 and created an alliance of labor, student unions and middle-class groups which all opposed the repression of the Chun Doo Hwan government. These forces organized huge protests that forced the South Korean regime into starting a democratic transition. The military and the two main opposition groups agreed on a new constitution that allows the elected president to remain in office for one five-year term. Since then, all three political groups in South Korea have held the Presidential office at least once (Ginsburg, 2008).

A good sign of democracy's health in South Korea is the fact that the former president Roh Moo-hyun was a former labor movement advocate. Having a labor activist as president was a pipedream in South Korea back in the beginning of the 1990s (Ginsburg, 2008). Thus, since its democratic transition South Korea did not show any sign of democratic weakness or authoritarian menace, the stability of democracy in South Korea can be attributed to the strong and efficient economy that was established by the authoritarian rule and to the smooth and peaceful political pact that has created the new democratic settings (Lee, 2007). However, despite these positive signs, South Korea is still undergoing developments and its political system is not fully consolidated. Moreover, a very strong state which has been responsible for decades is now challenged by an emerging and strong civil society (Lee and Yi, 2018). In addition, democracy in South Korea needs improvement to be called consolidated; in the meantime, there are some powerful groups that are still trying to exploit by forging democracy and using democracy as a cover for their anti-democratic plan (Mobrand, 2021). In the interim, interest groups are weakly organised and their ability to promote their political demands to guard their interests is limited (Dwivedi, 2017). In sum, democracy seems to be stable in South Korea; nevertheless, some work needs to be done to empower civil society, limit corruption and establish stronger links between citizens and their political institutions.

## **External Factors**

External factors include the political developments in neighboring countries, business partners, international organizations, and superpowers. It is vital to note here that these external factors have pushed South Korea and Taiwan to move toward democracy. For instance, the fall of President Marcos in 1986 in the Philippines represents a turning point for authoritarian regimes in both South Korea and Taiwan. The rulers of these two regimes did not feel secure and they became ready to offer compromises to the people and opposition groups; in fact, even before that, and right after the Kohsiung Incident in 1979, in which the Taiwanese government used force to crackdown on pro-democracy protests, the U.S. started to put increasing pressure on the Taiwanese leaders. In the meantime, America condemned the violent response of the Korean rulers during Kwangju protests in 1980 (Jacobs, 2007). However, since the fall of President Marcos' dictatorship rule in the Philippines, the U.S. had changed its foreign policy and stopped supporting military dictators. Likewise, the U.S. began to condemn the use of coercive force against civilians, while promoting democratization and economic liberalization. Consequently, this new American policy has weakened the military government in South Korea and reduced their ability to crush large protests as they did in the past. Subsequently, their democratic opponents understood the situation and started to mobilize against their government, knowing that they would not face a violent response. In that sense, the American new policy of promoting democracy was extremely fruitful in South Korea and other states (Im, 1995).

Certainly, South Korea and Taiwan represent two important cases where great powers and external factors impede or facilitate democratic transition. As we know, these two countries were pivotal states to the U.S. during the Cold War. During the War, the U.S. did not care to democratize its allies or prevent them from violating human rights. However, in 1973, when Park Chung Hee was involved in kidnapping Kim Dae Jung in Japan, the U.S. strongly criticized this act which saved Kim's life. Later, in the mid-1980s, the U.S. also warned the South Korean regime against using coercive forces against protests. Hence, hosting the Olympic Games in Seoul (1988) and American pressures on South Korean regime can be seen as influential factors in the democratic transition in South Korea (Ginsburg, 2008). However, despite American support of democracy in Korea, Left-wing forces opposed the presence of the American soldiers in their country and they saw the American military as the backers of their former authoritarian regime. Moreover, these left leaders feared that the ties between the Americans and the anti-democratic forces might lead to an end or the reversal of the democratic accomplishments in their country; in addition, they believe that an openness toward North Korea would be crucial to maintain democracy in the South (Chung, 2003).

In the case of Taiwan, the American influence also manifested in the rule that exiled native Taiwanese who stayed and studied in the U.S.. These Westernized Taiwanese played an important role in transmitting liberal and democratic ideas to their homeland. Consequently, these intellectuals have been a crucial component in the democratic transition, when the U.S. forced the Taiwanese mainlanders to allow them to return from exile (Ginsburg, 2008).

## **Internal Factors**

Internal factors include economic growth, wealth, inequality, culture, literacy etc. Domestic pressures are considered to be one of the most important reasons for their democratic transition in both Taiwan and South Korea. The Mainlanders in Taiwan wanted to guarantee their support against a possible threat from China by transforming into democracy and redistributing political power by integrating native Taiwanese. In 1971, when Taiwan lost its seat in the UN for China after American-Chinese rapprochement, the KMT began to reform its internal policy and started the process of Taiwanization of the party (Solinger, 2001).

In addition, economic prosperity created a large number of middle-class intellectuals who helped both countries to become democratic, as we saw earlier. Nonetheless the modernization process began a long time ago in the two countries. In fact, during the Japanese colonization, both Taiwan and South Korea witnessed modernization. Japan was interested to show the West that their colonies were well developed. Thus, they improved the administration, economy, and education in South Korea and Taiwan. For instance, many Taiwanese and Koreans received high-levels of education under the colonial regime; in addition, both states had electoral experience since the Japanese rule and through the authoritarian regimes. Both autocrats and Japanese allowed limited voting as long as it did not constitute a threat to the status quo (Jacobs, 2007). Hence, modernization and the idea of democracy were not new in either the South Korean or Taiwanese societies.

### **Asian Values vs. Democracy**

Many authoritarian dictators in East Asia have claimed that the inimitable culture of these states and their Asian values make them unsuitable for democracy (Inglehart, 2000; 2003). Hence, defenders of these Asian Confucian values support an Asian style of governance, based on the Confucian notion of collective welfare and fulfilling of one's duties, while discarding the Western ethic that stresses instead personal freedom and respecting the rights of others (Park and Shin, 2004). It is common to claim that the East Asian culture is thus not democracy-friendly (Hsieh, 2000). Unquestionably, Confucian-Asian values put more emphasis on the collective welfare, which is considered an alternative to liberal democracy in the Western sense. According to Ginsburg (2008), however, although democracy is usually described as a Judeo-Christian or Western notion, Taiwan and South Korea represent a counterargument to this claim.

The central elements of Confucian ethics comprise two axes: Asian social values and Asian political values. The Asian social values support social collectivism and day-to-day life and behavior; Asian political values are more focused on the governing type, the role of the state and its relations with the citizens. Park and Shin, (2004: 23) point out that "both types of values are rooted in the Confucian conception of self as an interdependent entity and that of family as the prototype of social and political institutions." As a result, during the dictatorship period, rulers in South Korea and Taiwan used the argument of Asian values as a reason that democracy was not suitable for their countries. Moreover, they relied on these values to legitimize their authoritarian rule; consequently, the Confucian legacy and its values are cited as the reason that a large number of people in South Korea and Taiwan possess so-called 'authoritarian nostalgia' (Park and Shin, 2004: 36). However, despite the strength of East Asian cultural values, there is no proof that these values are incompatible with democratic change in these societies. Indeed, the South Korean and Taiwanese examples represent a valid counterargument to this claim of cultural incompatibility.

### **Economic Factors**

South Korea and Taiwan are both well-developed and industrialized countries with close ties to the West. It is important to analyze their democratic experience in depth, to see whether there is a relationship between democracy and the economy; did democracy come to these two countries because they achieved a certain level of economic advancement and, is economic wealth behind the stability of democracy in these two countries?

Fukuyama (1992) argues that all democracies need to transition from agricultural into industrialized and well-urbanized economies before becoming democratic. Moreover, most successful democracies have managed to achieve high GNP growth rates - such as Taiwan with 10% GNP growth rate - before their transition to democracy (Fukuyama, 1992). Hence, some scholars argue that democracy in Taiwan and South Korea is safe; no democracy with

such a high GDP and GNI per capita has collapsed (Zhu et al., 2001). Indeed, the economic growth that authoritarian regimes in South Korea and Taiwan have achieved has created social transformation by shifting a huge portion of the population from the poverty line into the middle class. Thus, when this emerging middle class became politically active, they acted as an internal driving force inside the political system that helped with the peaceful transition in these two states to democracy (Ginsburg, 2008). Nonetheless, economic growth and high level of GDP per capita does not necessarily lead to democracy. There are examples of poorer countries that have managed to establish a long or short-lived democratic transition. As a result, Przeworski et al. (2000) argue, rather, that democratic change takes place arbitrarily; however, if democracy does happen to be established in a wealthy country that has a high-level GDP per capita, it will survive. Przeworski's position is convincing because he is concerned with stability after democratic transition. Hence, based on this argument, it is unlikely that both South Korea and Taiwan will witness an authoritarian backlash.

### **External Danger**

Usually, external dangers are regarded as an impediment to democracy. In other words, wars and unsettled conflicts can severely damage the democratic process and can form an excuse used by politicians or military to hinder democracy in favor of ostensible security and national sovereignty.

Both South Korea and Taiwan have unsettled conflicts with their neighbors. The relationship between South Korea and North Korea remains strained. Meanwhile, Taiwan's international status is not resolved and its relationship with mainland China still constitutes a real danger. Additionally, both South Korea and Taiwan have focused on their economy and development as shields against external threats and in order to maintain their sovereignty. They both face existential threat because of hostile neighbors which claim to be the legitimate regimes. These security threats have helped elites in both South Korea and Taiwan to improve their way of governing and to reduce corruption. For instance, KMT (The Kuomintang) was considered to be corrupt and inefficient when it was ruling China mainland; however, because of the security threats, this party developed a very sophisticated way of governing Taiwan in order to remain in power (Ginsburg, 2008).

In South Korea the conflict with North Korea had been used as an excuse to hinder democracy. Yet, for more than three decades, South Korea had witnessed continuous economic growth which was also accompanied by the increase of the size of the middle class and the labor force. Adding to these points, the economic growth put South Korea ahead of North Korea in term of defensive capabilities. On the one hand, all these factors pushed the South Koreans to mobilise against their authoritarian regime and to call for a democratic change, because security issues were used to justify repression, military coups and restricting liberties became invalid (Chung, 2003). On the other hand, the authoritarian leaders of South Korea had another reason to seek democratic transition, because they wanted to look different in the eyes of the international community from their Northern communist rival. Similarly, Taiwan also wanted by this transition to distance itself from China. As a result, both wanted to be seen by the world as "free" by contrast to their neighbors (Solinger, 2001). In other words, both South Korea and Taiwan embraced their democratic privilege, and this drove a desire to distance themselves from the authoritarian North Korean and Chinese models.

With this intention, the Taiwanese elected President Tsai Ing-wen on January 11, 2020. He received 57% of the votes and his agenda was less accommodating to Mainland China than her rival Han Kuo-yu (Bailey, 2020). This democratic difference even pushed the Taiwanese Foreign minister to warn the West in May 2021 that China would destroy democracy in Taiwan as it had already in Hong Kong (MacDonald. & Common, 2021). Therefore, as

democracy became consolidated and rooted the Taiwanese sentiment, the desire to remain free from Mainland China grew stronger in tandem; meanwhile, the Chinese Communist Party's bad records on human rights, as well as the strict policy that the Chinese government applied after controlling Hong Kong did not encourage Taiwanese to want unification with the Mainland (Bailey, 2020). Similarly, any possible reunification between the two Koreas will depend on the willingness of North Korea to begin democratic change; without this, the South Koreans will not be interested in reuniting the Korean peninsula (Chung, 2003). Besides, the U.S. is still considered the main security provider for both South Korea and Taiwan. Thus, in their hostile environment, both states see the U.S. commitment to defend them as crucial to their survival (Scalapino, 1993). The Americans continue to sell arms to Taiwan and to strongly oppose any Chinese move to reunite with Taiwan by force. Meanwhile, the U.S. will also respond to any possible threat from North Korea on the South. Hence, American support is essential to guarantee stability in these two democratic East Asian states (Scalapino, 1993). Anyhow, democratic change in South Korea and Taiwan does not seem to strengthen the security of both countries and it is possible to argue that the democracy here is impeding any possible reunification between China and Taiwan, as well between the two Koreas, because both China and North Korea are not democratic.

### **Democratic Consolidation**

Some argue that the Western model, based on political freedom and equality, constitutes democracy, whereas others emphasise that democracy must embody socioeconomic equality in addition (Hsieh, 2000). Lee (2007: 102) defines democratization as the process that: "involves holding free elections on a regular schedule and determining who governs on the basis of the results. Democratization is also a complex historical process, consisting of several analytically distinct, but empirically overlapping, stages. It involves bringing about the end of an undemocratic regime, the inauguration of a democratic regime, and then the consolidation of a democratic system."

However, democratic consolidation means that the government has set up stringent measures that are used to improve democracy (Sin and Wells, 2005). More clearly, Andreas Schedler, pointed out that "democratic consolidation was meant to describe the challenge of making new democracies secure, of extending their life expectancy beyond the short term, of making them immune against the threat of authoritarian regression, of building dams against eventual 'reverse waves'" (1998: 91). This democratic consolidation requires the commitment of the ruling elites and the population to adopt and accept the democratic game, while rejecting the authoritarian past. In other words, democracy is consolidated when both the elites and the majority of people believe that democracy is the best system to guarantee their progress and development; yet, in the new democracies, it is possible that this belief in democracy is not strongly rooted in the mind of the majority of people and here the role of the civil society is crucial for entrenching the culture of democracy within both the elites and the people (Dwivedi, 2017).

However, there has been some concern regarding the democratic process in the two countries. Leaders in both South Korean and Taiwan were involved in electoral fraud - bribing voters either through money or gifts; furthermore, with South Korean politicians, even the presidents were involved in big economic and political corruption scandals. This kind of 'democratic' corruption and fraud made some people who were in favor of democracy question their support. In the meantime, in the 1990s, the problem of buying votes and bribing voters seemed to be getting worse (Solinger, 2001).

Although democracy might bring stability in the cases of South Korea and Taiwan, this system needs more economic and social reform to be truly consolidated. There is much to do in order to improve the labor conditions in these two countries, especially in South Korea,

where labor conditions are worse than Taiwan, and its workers suffer more exploitation; new reforms are taking place and the labor conditions in South Korea have been improved in the last decade but, nevertheless, there is much to do in order to guarantee that these workers and their unions remain peaceful and contained (Buchanan and Nicholls, 2003).

Arguably, democracy is not in real danger in either South Korea or Taiwan but there have been concerns about its popular support dating from the early 2000s. Asian Barometer survey findings from 2002-3, which are based on nation-wide and face-to-face interviews, show that over 50% of the participants in the survey were unsatisfied with their democratic regime and they preferred an authoritarian rule or were not committed to democracy; furthermore, the level of support shown in this survey is lower than any popular support of democracy in the other countries of the Third Wave and can only found in struggled democracies like Mexico and Ecuador (Chu, 2006). Chu argues that these shocking findings represent what he called “authoritarian nostalgia” (Chu, 2006: 16). Nonetheless, the same Asian Barometer survey showed that South Korean respondents, unlike Taiwanese, were clearer about their support of democracy and their rejection to authoritarian rule (Chu, 2006). Other findings in this survey regarded liberal values and rule of law and showed that there is lack of liberal culture. These liberal values must deepen in Taiwan and South Korea in order to consider their democratic experience consolidated. The respondents show that ‘Asian exceptionalism’ remains prominent in East Asia and, unless liberal democratic culture becomes widespread in these countries, the values based on the Confucian tradition will remain solid; hence, South Korea and Taiwan will continue to face this “nostalgia for authoritarianism” because citizens are still comparing current regimes with the more efficient previous authoritarian regime that achieved economic prosperity (Chang et al., 2007).

The assumption that the Confucian values or Asian Values are not compatible with democracy should not, however, be exaggerated. For example, a more recent nationwide survey conducted in 2015 by Cho et al. (2019) that questioned 1,300 South Korean respondents’ views regarding democracy, differed from the previous and suggested that South Koreans now strongly support their political system. Likewise, the 2014-16 Asian Barometer survey showed that 92% of South Koreans and 87% of Taiwanese see democracy as the best system of government (Shin and Kim, 2016). Furthermore, Japan, like Korea and Taiwan, share these “Asian values” and yet, perhaps unexpectedly, their citizens’ show support for democracy. Moreover, people in these countries have gradually distanced themselves from the authoritarianism and have achieved enormous progress.

However, for these states to be truly consolidated democracies it would require a larger number of their citizens to participate more actively in political life (Sin and Wells, 2005). Indeed, unrest is threatening these new democracies. For instance, South Korea was considered an example of successful democratic transition until the 2016-17 candlelights protests, which were ignited after a political scandal linked to President Park Geun-hye that raised doubts about whether the system was consolidated; it also indicated deep problems between the civil society and the Korean representative institutions (Cho et al., 2019). Nonetheless, South Koreans are resisting and protesting against these forces in order to protect their democratic achievements (Mobrand, 2021). The massive five months of candlelight protests, which began in late October 2016, brought the downfall of President Park Geun-hye (Cho et al., 2019). Likewise, in Taiwan, the student-led legislative’s chamber occupation in April 2014 against a trade agreement with China also indicated widespread distrust of the political system (Weatherall and Huang, 2017). However, viewed from another angle, it can be argued that these protests actually evidence that South Koreans and the Taiwanese are determined to defend their democracy against a potential anti-democratic backlash or what they perceive to be actions of their governments that are incompatible with democracy.



In the meantime, recent surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center in spring 2019 showed good signs - 55% of South Koreans were satisfied with their democracy, while 44% were not satisfied. Younger people between ages 18-29 were more satisfied, at 75% (Pew Research Center: 1, 2020). This means that in the future the level of satisfaction will possibly increase, and that so-called “authoritarian nostalgia” is more of a feature of the older generations. Likewise, in Taiwan, a survey conducted by the Asian Barometer showed that the level of satisfaction with democracy has risen remarkably from 47% in 2011 to 55% in 2006 and 59 % in 2010 (Wu et al., 2012).

Nevertheless, South Koreans’ support of democracy does not mean that they trust politicians or their political institutions. The Asian Barometer Wave 3, 2010-2012 survey found low trust in Taiwanese and South Koreans regarding their public institutions; for instance, 36% of South Koreans and 34% of Taiwanese trust the top political office (the president or the prime minister), 11% of South Koreans and 19% of Taiwanese trust the parliament; 22 % of South Koreans and 33% of Taiwanese trust the national government; 29% of South Koreans and 50% of Taiwanese trust their local government (Wang, 2013). Additionally, Jun and Kim argue that there is a low trust of politicians and institutions in South Korea, which is caused by the Confucian culture that emphasizes high trust of relatives and low trust of outsiders; this culture does not promote lateral dialogue in the family but rather encourages loyalty and obedience to the superior figure (Jun and Kim, 2002). Hence, further reforms in the institutions as well as more efforts to build trust between political institutions and politicians on the one hand and the citizens on the other hand are essential steps in the long term to maintain and consolidate democracy.

## Conclusion

To summarize, South Korea and Taiwan are pertinent cases for students of democratic change. This paper has analyzed both internal and external factors that led to the successful transition in these cases. It showed that these emergent democracies are gradually and steadily on their way to achieve a consolidated democracy; yet there is room for improvement, especially regarding trust-building between the citizens and their public institutions. One of the reasons for studying the South Korean and Taiwanese cases is that the transition has been relatively peaceful. This paper showed that the Asian values were seen for a long time as incompatible with democracy, because democracy is regarded as a Judeo-Christians idea. However, South Korea and Taiwan have complicated this assumption.

The future of democracy in Taiwan will necessarily depend on the will of Taiwanese and on the special relationship that Taiwan has with the United States. Once this relation has faded, or the United States is no longer able to provide protection to Taiwan, the latter will be more vulnerable to be under China’s influence. In this scenario, China is likely to have the last say on the type of political system that Taiwan will have or indeed whether the island will remain independent from the mainland. Taiwan’s relation with China, and its unsettled international status, will remain a challenge for this emerging democracy, especially being invaded by China is a big concern for the Taiwanese. Moreover, the relationship with China has created local conflict in Taiwan over how Taiwanese define their national identity and if they still consider themselves to be Chinese. A recent survey conducted in 2019 by the Pew Research Centre showed that approximately two thirds of Taiwanese do not identify themselves as Chinese (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Neither South Korea nor Taiwan represents the strongest example of democracy; yet there is popular support from the people of Taiwan and South Korea to move forward and not to allow the return of authoritarian systems. Taiwanese proactively distance themselves from authoritarian China. South Koreans too distance themselves from their Northern communist

rival. In both cases, democracy in South Korea and Taiwan seem to hinder any possible reunification between Taiwan and China and between the two Koreas respectively.

Certainly, South Koreans might look happier with their democracy, which reduced tensions and internal conflicts. However, a possible clash with North Korea and social inequality remains a serious issue that would destabilize that young democracy.

In addition, this paper argued that so-called Asian values did not hinder democracy in South Korea nor Taiwan, and these two states represent a valid counterargument to this claim of cultural incompatibility. Furthermore, economic success and the high growth rate has not necessarily caused but has at least facilitated the democratic transition in these two states and has helped to maintain democratic gains.

Lastly, many lessons from the Korean and the Taiwanese democratic experiences might help to look at other countries' democratic failure or success. However, it is hard to take or adopt 'Korean' or 'Taiwanese' or any other model and guarantee its success elsewhere. There is no universally applicable democratic recipe; each country is unique in its structure, population, demography, economy, culture, history, geopolitics, and wealth. Nevertheless, the road to democracy can begin only if both the government and the people in any given authoritarian regime have the willingness to move in that direction. Islam and Confucianism are both unfairly accused by some of being incompatible with democracy. Yet no culture is inherently 'democracy-friendly'. External factors might help to initiate a democratic transition; for example, the fall of the authoritarian regime of Marcos in the Philippines, and the changing of American policy to not support dictators in Asia pushed the ruling elites in Taiwan and South Korea to face development. Meanwhile, internal factors are very important; hence, a peaceful democratic transition requires that both the people and the ruling elites understand that this is the right moment to start democratic change and to reject authoritarianism. It is arguably ill understood by the populace that when the power-holders are not ready to compromise or to leave power, transition to democracy is typically bloody violent, especially where there are ethnic divisions. Under these conditions the country is likely to enter a dark period of civil war and possible partition, rather than smooth democratic transition. Thus, the South Korean and the Taiwanese examples of a peaceful democratic transition represent a safer way and reducing the risk to democratize an authoritarian country.

## References

- Bailey, K. (2020). Maintaining Taiwan's democracy. *Comparative Strategy*, 39(3), 223-238.
- Buchanan, P., & Nicholls, K. (2003). Labour Politics and Democratic Transition in South Korea and Taiwan. *Government and Opposition*, 38(2), 203-237.
- Chang, Y., Zhu, Y., & Pak, C. (2007). Authoritarian Nostalgia in Asia. *Journal of Democracy* 18(3), 66-80.
- Cheng, T. (1989). Democratizing the Quasi-Leninist Regime in Taiwan. *World Politics*, 41(4), 471-499.
- Cho, Y., Kim, M., & Kim, Y. (2019). Cultural Foundations of Contentious Democracy in South Korea: What Type of Democracy Do Korean Citizens Prefer?. *Asian Survey*, 59(2), 272-294.
- Chu, Y. (2006). Third-Wave Democratization in East Asia: Challenges and Prospect. *ASIEN*, 100, 11-17.
- Chung, C. (2003). Democratization in South Korea and Inter-Korean Relations. *Pacific Affairs*, 76(1), 9-35.
- Dwivedi, S. (2017). Civil society and democracy in East Asia with special reference to South Korea. *Journal of Social and Economic Development*, 19(1), 211-226.
- Fukuyama, F. (1992). Capitalism & Democracy: The Missing Link. *Journal of Democracy*, 3(3), 100-110.

- Ginsburg, T. (2008). Lessons for Democratic Transitions: Case Studies from Asia. *Orbis*, 52(1), 91-105.
- Hsieh, J. (2000). East Asian Culture and Democratic Transition, With Special Reference to the Case of Taiwan. *Journal of Asian and African Studies (Leiden)*, 35(1), 29-42.
- Im, H. (1995). Politics of Democratic Transition from Authoritarian Rule in South Korea. *Korean Social Science Journal*, 21, 133-151.
- Inglehart, R. (2000). Culture and Democracy. In: Harrison LE and Huntington SP (eds) *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*. NY: Basic Books.
- Inglehart, R. (2003). How Solid is Mass Support for Democracy—And How Can We Measure It?. *Political Science & Politics*, 36(1), 51-57.
- Jacobs, J. (2007). Taiwan and South Korea: Comparing East Asia's Two 'Third-Wave' Democracies. *Issues & Studies*, 43(4), 227-260.
- Jun, J., & Kim, T. (2002). Distrust as a hindrance to democratic governance in South Korea. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 10(1), 1-16.
- Kim, S. (1997). State and Civil Society in South Korea's Democratic Consolidation: Is the Battle Really over?. *Asian Survey*, 37(12), 1135-1144.
- Lee, J., & Yi, D. (2018). Still a new democracy? Individual-level effects of social trust on political trust in South Korea. *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 26(2), 201-220.
- Lee, S. (2007). Democratic Transition and the Consolidation of Democracy in South Korea. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 3(1), 99 -125.
- MacDonald, B., & Common, D. (2021). *China has crushed opposition in Hong Kong, Taiwan fears it is next*. Retrieved from [www.cbc.ca/news/politics/taiwan-joseph-wu-support-democracies-china-aggression-1.6036873](http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/taiwan-joseph-wu-support-democracies-china-aggression-1.6036873).
- Mobrand, E. (2021). Prosecution reform and the politics of faking democracy in South Korea. *Critical Asian Studies*, 53(2), 259-283.
- Park, C. & Shin, D. (2004). *Do Asian Values Deter Popular Support for Democracy in South Korea?*. Asian Barometer, Jointly Published by Globalbarometer, Working Paper Series: No. 26.
- Pew Research Centre. (2020). *In Taiwan, Views of Mainland China Mostly Negative*. Retrieved from [www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/05/12/in-taiwan-views-of-mainland-china-mostly-negative/](http://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/05/12/in-taiwan-views-of-mainland-china-mostly-negative/).
- Phillips, S., (2016). Democracy and national destinies on Taiwan. *Nations and Nationalism*, 22(4), 666-685.
- Przeworski, A., Alvarez, M., Cheibub, J., & Limongi, F. (2000). *Democracy and development: political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Scalapeno, R. (1993). Democratizing Dragons: South Korea & Taiwan. *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 3(1), 99-125.
- Schedler, A. (1998). What is Democratic Consolidation?. *Journal of Democracy*, 9(2), 91-107.
- Shin, D., & Kim, H. (2016). *Do People in East Asia Truly Prefer Democracy to its Alternatives? Western Theories versus East Asian Realities*. Asian Barometer, Jointly Published by Globalbarometer, Working Paper Series: No.117.
- Sin, T., & Wells, J. (2005). Is Democracy the Only Game in Town?. *Journal of Democracy*, 16(2), 88-101.
- Solinger, D. (2001). Ending One-Party Dominance: Korea, Taiwan, Mexico. *Journal of Democracy*, 12(1), 30-42.
- Tien, H., & Chu, Y. (1996). Building Democracy in Taiwan. *The China Quarterly*, 148, 1141-1170.

- Tsai, C., Chen, L., & Yu, C. (2008). Comparing Consensus on Taiwan Democracy Among the Mass Public and Elites. In: Paolino P and Meernik J (eds) *Democratization in Taiwan: Challenges in Transformation* (pp. 71-86). Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Wang, Z. (2013). *Institutional Trust in East Asia*. Asian Barometer, Jointly Published by Globalbarometer, Working Paper Series: No. 92.
- Weatherall, M., & Huang, M. (2017). *Perceptions of Corruption and Institutional Trust in Asia: Evidence from the Asian Barometer Survey*. Asian Barometer, Jointly Published by Globalbarometer, Working Paper Series: No. 136.
- Wu, J., Weatherall, M., & Chang, Y. (2012). *How Taiwanese Citizens View Democracy: Change and Continuity in Democratic Attitudes and Values in Taiwan's Democratic Cons.* Asian Barometer, Jointly Published by Globalbarometer Working Paper Series: No. 55.
- Zhu, Y., Diamond, L., & Sin, T. (2001). Halting Progress in Korea and Taiwan. *Journal of Democracy*, 12(1), 122-136.