

# **Protest and Democratic Consolidation: A Korean Perspective**

*José Alemán  
Princeton University*

## **Introduction**

Scenes of workers or other citizens clashing with riot police are a common occurrence in South Korea. While this may come as no surprise to most adult Koreans, such collective mobilization challenges established theories of democratization and democratic consolidation that strongly associate the latter with moderation of social protests.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the expectation that the more a political structure accommodates participation, the less people protest<sup>2</sup>, protests have persisted in South Korea even after the country passed several tests of successful democratization. To be fair, violent and illegal protests have declined. But no important shifts in strategies, nor significant innovations in protest repertoires, seem to have taken place. Demonstrations and strikes have become part and parcel of Korean democracy.

This article contends that political scientists have not paid sufficient attention to the ways in which political protest can contribute to the consolidation of a new democracy. Political contention in institutionalized democracies typically revolves around well-defined cleavages. When social movements lack institutional access and support structures for reform, movements are weak; however, a broader conception of stability and consolidation is necessary to enable the analyst to examine the consequences of contention over a protracted period.

A change in some dimensions of the political opportunity structure in stable countries will send clear signals about the feasibility of protest. In a democratizing country, however, it is sometimes not clear how stable political alignments are and whether strategically-placed allies will be available to protesting groups. In this situation, it is hard for groups in civil society to craft their demands as responses to partial openings or closings in the pre established institutional network of the polity (as in Western democracies).

This article proceeds as follows. The first section, examines the theoretical links between democratization and protest, followed by an appraisal of the Korean transition in the second section. Section three introduces the role of labor mobilization in the transition. Once a polity becomes democratic, the argument goes, political opportunities

help determine the relative cost and benefit of protest. Consequently, sections four and five analyze the evolution of social protests during the Roh Tae Woo (1988-1993) and Kim Young Sam (1993-1998) administrations.

According to prominent theories of democratic consolidation, the consolidation of a new democracy will occur only when cooperation replaces conflict as the most promising mechanism for advancing the interests of important groups. In final section then, the Kim Dae Jung administration's (1998-2003) experience with social concertation is evaluated. The paper concludes with the institutionalization of Korea's first significant progressive political force – the Democratic Labor Party (DLP).

### **Protest and Democratization: The Links Revisited**

Political scientists have not clearly articulated the links between political protest and democratization. Despite the fact that popular mobilization contributed to the breakdown of many authoritarian regimes, the first studies of democratic transitions argued that the opening of access to power discouraged mobilization. In later works, some noted the profound discrepancy between existing theories and what was taking place on the ground.<sup>3</sup> They quickly reasoned that opening political systems decreased the costs of mobilization, thereby increasing the likelihood that dissent would take place. The focus of such studies, however, remained on how social movements affected the process of transition or the democratization of civil society,<sup>4</sup> not on what patterns of protest to expect once the initial transition ended.

It is then that a second and much longer period begins in which institutional, behavioral and attitudinal regimes linking civil and political society are supposed to crystallize.<sup>5</sup> If all goes well, a consolidated democracy is born in which most conflicts are processed through institutions that evoke compliance of the relevant political forces.<sup>6</sup> Along the way, actors learn<sup>7</sup> or find it in their own self interest to play by the rules of the new game.<sup>8</sup> How exactly this procedural learning takes place, however, has not been demonstrated.

To be sure, part of the problem lies in the perceived elite bias of the democratization literature. Collier and Mahoney argue that labor movements played pivotal roles in democratic transitions by moving the transition forward and expanding the scope of conflict in the new democratic regimes.<sup>9</sup> Many studies, however, do not focus on the role of non-elites, usually because subordinate groups were not sufficiently strategic during the transition. Labor unions in some Southern European and Latin American countries resorted to mass protest once the transition began. The prevailing view, however, is that worker's

sense of relative deprivation played into the electoral maneuvering of the opposition. Once wages increased and economic growth was achieved, unions ceased to push for political goals.<sup>10</sup>

The exception is perhaps Valenzuela, who addressed the role and position occupied by the most influential social movement – organized labor – in processes of transition from authoritarianism to democracy.<sup>11</sup> While labor mobilization is important for the initial move towards a democratic transition, Valenzuela argued, labor’s subsequent moderation is equally important in seeing the transition through to a successful democratic conclusion.

**The South Korean Transition: Changing Elite-Mass Relations?**

Studies of protest activity in democratic countries have relied on the notion of political opportunity structures (POS) to explain the incidence, frequency, and intensity of political protests. Protest actions are considered rational to the extent that they result from favorable opportunities and the expectation of rewards. This assumption of calculation, however, is inconsistent with the protest cycles that have come to define contentious political participation in South Korea after the inauguration of the Sixth Republic.<sup>12</sup>

Because the transition to democracy in 1987 resulted in a government of reformed authoritarians who merged with the remaining two conservative parties in 1990 to create a Grand Conservative Coalition, trying to separate protest activity that is considered a reaction to perceived government illegitimacy from behavior that could be considered “normal” under a newly established democracy is at best difficult. As the numbers below make clear, the number of protests was higher every year from 1988 to 1992 than at any time during the Fifth Republic (except in 1987), and most of these events were illegal and violent.

**Table 1**  
**Police Suppression Maneuvers**

Year	Frequency	Total Man Days	Duration	Largest deployment	Cause of Demonstrations	Number of Police Mobilized	Ratio of Police to Demonstrators
1982	69	55,692	59	6,000	Opposition to the Government	82,488	0.7:1
1983	143	74,215	76	5,500	Campus Democratization	168,989	0.4:1

1984	1,548	427,105	175	19,055	Opposition to the Government	3,947,850	1:9
1985	2,463	469,974	238	37,655	Opposition to the Government	6,000,900	1:12
1986	2,201	514,730	269	12,090	Opposition to the Government (Constitutional Revision)	6,540,600	1:13
1987	12,957	3,145,667	338	194,998	Constitutional Revision, labor strikes, torture censure	8,130,450	1:25
1988	6,921	1,789,967	321	96,584	North-South festival, labor strife, 5 <sup>th</sup> Republic liquidation	6,626,528	1:3.7
1989	7,056	1,984,987	337	69,910	Launching of Teacher's Union, Campaign to Liquidate the National Security Statue, Suppression of the Pyongyang People's Festival	5,908,826	1:3.3
1990	6,715	1,874,874	332	98,580	5 <sup>th</sup> Republic Liquidation, 3-Party Merger	2,076,073	1:1.1
1991	6,491	2,382,000	337	105,000	Opposition to the Government	2,217,222	1:0.9
1992	4,946	1,604,400	350	61,200	Opposition to the Government	1,509,840	1:0.9

Source: Police Annual Report, National Police Agency, 1991 and 1992.

These five years, contrary to Tarrow's (1993) depiction of a cycle of mobilization, do not fit the demonstrative effect of a mobilization cycle in which action on the part of a group of early risers triggers processes of diffusion, extension, imitation and reaction among other groups. Quite to the contrary, each of the actors instrumental in this cycle of mobilization – workers, students, dissidents and regular citizens – fits very differently into the smaller cycles of protest that made up this long period of mobilization.

Labor was the first mass actor to mobilize through the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle (July-September of 1987). This struggle was ignited right after Roh Tae Woo, then chairman of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, announced his eight-point democratization package.<sup>13</sup> On July 5, only a week after the surprise announcement, workers in strategic export zones began organize unions. Although strikes initially concentrated on higher wages and better working

conditions, these unions (established independently of the official Federation of Korean Trade Unions) went well beyond narrow economic issues.

The union movement, moreover, was politically and economically repressed at the time of the transition. Consequently, only well-paid manufacturing workers felt secure enough to demand the expansion of political rights and democratization on the shop floor. Through their actions, almost 1,500 unions sprang up within six months of the June 30 announcement. Many studies have emphasized the lack of organization and coordination<sup>14</sup> and the economic nature of these strikes in which 1.3 million workers participated. More important, however, was the fact that this frontal challenge accomplished several important political goals. This form of class warfare resulted in fierce attacks against employers and managers, forcing the government to include revisions to the labor code in its reform package. Second, it created a new union leadership in more than 3,300 firms with a new creed – militant unionism – which, once mobilized, began to take a much more political overtone.<sup>15</sup>

Contrary to labor militancy in other democratic transitions, moreover, the 3,749 labor disputes occurring in 1987 did not represent an effort by the political opposition to enhance its electoral position.<sup>16</sup> As a matter of fact, the Great Workers' Struggle represented a serious threat to South Korea's export economy, but the ruling party could not repress these protests ahead of the first presidential and parliamentary elections. Having declared the principle of autonomous industrial relations, regime and oppositional elites had no choice but to address the labor question directly in the negotiations leading to a new constitution.

In November of that year, the ruling DJP and the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) amended the Trade Union Law, greatly simplifying the process of registering and organizing unions<sup>17</sup> and limiting administrative powers over internal union affairs.<sup>18</sup> With these revisions, unions broadened the terms of the transition to democracy and ensured they remained key actors in the post-transitional period.<sup>19</sup>

The democratic regime inaugurated between November of 1987 and April of 1988, however, virtually guaranteed that the labor movement would make protests and strikes indispensable tools to make its voice heard. This ensured that the first condition identified by Valenzuela as facilitating democratic consolidation – labor union moderation – would not be present in the Korean context. By upholding the three nos in Korean industrial relations – no third party mediation in disputes (including trade union mediation), no labor participation in politics, and no labor organization beyond the firm

level – the Trade Union Act continued to deny labor rights of full democratic citizenship.

### **The Sixth Republic: What Kind of Democracy?**

In South Korea, as we have seen, social movement actors not only possessed the conditions for independent intervention in the political arena, but, more importantly, became effective in confronting authoritarian elites and pressing traditional opposition elites to broaden the terms of the transition to democracy. Nevertheless, a second factor is necessary to understand the role of social movements in democratization – the capacity for coalition building of the established opposition. According to Sandoval, cohesion within the coalition confronting the authoritarian regime results in the incorporation of new actors into the realm of institutional politics.

Over time, by stabilizing the political opportunity structure, social movement subordination to the agenda of the opposition makes political contention more predictable.<sup>20</sup> In Korea's case, however, the opposition's lack of cohesion prevented the creation of an effective alliance with nascent social movements. As a result, the inauguration of the Sixth Republic in February of 1988 ignited a wave of social mobilization not witnessed in many other transitional settings.

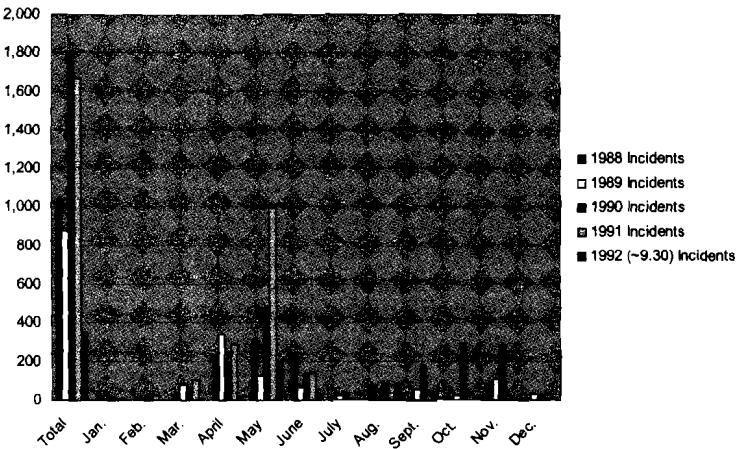
Ironically, one of Roh's first moves as president was to emphasize his desire to govern by consensus with the opposition. On January 11, Roh established a 52-member ad hoc Committee for the Promotion of Democracy and National Reconciliation (CPDNR). During the course of its deliberations, the CPDNR acknowledged that martial law had involved 'excessive' abuses of human rights.<sup>21</sup> On April 1, following the CPDNR's recommendations, Roh issued an official apology for the Kwangju massacre, which the government renamed "a struggle for democratization".<sup>22</sup>

The ruling party, however, did not attain the much-sought consensus. The opposition viewed its reforms as delayed and insufficient, and this only contributed to the perception of the Roh regime as illegitimate. The outcome of the 13<sup>th</sup> National Assembly elections (April 1988), in which the ruling Democratic Justice Party (DJP) lost its parliamentary majority, added to the problem by altering the stability of the new regime. This strategic opening was used by the opposition to press for a complete liquidation of the Fifth Republic and additional labor reforms.

Because social movement organizations could count on their autonomous role, protests at least initially had more to do with collective group grievances than with emerging opportunities in the new political domain. Student protests in the first four years of the

Sixth Republic, for example, were less frequent than conflicts over democratic reforms between the parliamentary opposition and Roh Tae Woo's government. As a result, consistent temporal patterns of political protest can be observed, regardless of the year, during Roh Tae Woo's administration. The number of incidents was high in April and May – the traditional season of student activism – the summer, and the month of November.

**Figure 1**  
**Number of tear gas incidents (1988~9.1992)<sup>23</sup>**



Students sponsored the bulk of demonstrations from 1988 through 1992. The number of demonstrations in which regular citizens and religious dissidents accounted for the bulk of protestors remained low, but was higher in some cases than protests sponsored by workers, who could be counted on the to use the strike as their preferred protest strategy.<sup>24</sup> Student protests remained high in the number of participants and frequency until 1991.

In term of participation, the numbers of those involved was high in 1989 and 1991, lower in 1988, 1990, and the first nine months of 1992. The beginning and ending years of Roh Tae Woo's administration were transitional years in which many potential protestors most likely waited out the consolidation of new patterns of governing. During this period, government efforts to put in place tougher measures to deter protests backfired.

On December 28, 1988, for example, President Roh Tae-woo made a special announcement signaling the end of the government's policy of not actively confronting strikes and demonstrations. Roh declared that South Korea was suffering from the "throes of democratization" and ordered a crackdown on violent anti-government protests and illegal labor disputes. "It is a daily event that universities and factories are paralyzed, illegal street protests cause traffic chaos, public offices, foreign missions and the National Assembly building are occupied and political party offices are firebombed," he said.<sup>25</sup> In response to the use of petrol bombs in confrontations with riot police or in incidences in which they were thrown at official buildings by anti-government demonstrators, the Cabinet followed up on February 9 with a bill stipulating three years in jail for those carrying firebombs and seven years in jail for those using them.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of these announcements, protests increased throughout 1989. A crippling strike at the Hyundai shipyard lasted 109 days and ended only when a massive military-style operation involving 20,000 riot police stormed the shipyard from land, sea and air. On April 19, an amended Demonstration and Assembly Act took effect. With demonstrators using campuses as staging grounds for street battles, the government felt compelled to ban demonstrations in "prohibited zones," including the major streets in sixteen cities.

The number of illegal strikes stayed high with almost 8,000 new unions being created in the two years after 1987 and the rate of organization rising from 15 to 23 percent. There were 1,173 labor disputes in 1988 and 1,678 from January to October of 1989.

**Table 2**  
**Increase in Labor Unions and Labor Strikes**

Year	Union Members	Conflicts	Strike participants	Days lost
1981	966,738	186	34,586	30,948
1982	984,136	88	8,967	11,504
1983	1,009,881	98	11,100	8,671
1984	1,010,522	113	16,400	19,900
1985	1,004,398	265	28,700	64,300
1986	1,035,890	276	46,941	72,025
1987	1,267,457	3,749	1,262,285	6,946,935
1988	1,707,456	1,873	293,455	5,400,837
1989	1,932,415	1,616	409,134	6,351,443
1990	1,886,884	322	133,916	4,487,151
1991	1,803,408	234	175,089	3,271,334
1992	1,734,598	235	105,034	1,527,612



1993	1,667,373	144	108,577	1,308,326
1994	1,659,011	121	104,339	1,484,368
1995	1,614,800	88	49,717	392,581
1996	1,598,558	85	79,495	892,987
1997	1,484,194	78	43,991	444,720
1998	1,401,940	129	146,065	1,452,096
1999	1,480,666	198	92,026	1,366,281

Source: National Statistical Office

The newly-established unions in strategic export industries increased their strength by coming together on a company level. The proportion of organized workers increased to 23.3 percent in 1989. Horizontal unionization was matched by vertical expansion. Five industrial federations were established by splitting existing federations and unionizing previously unorganized white-collar employers. White collar unions, unimaginable in the past, adopted a progressive and somewhat radical orientation. Finally, most enterprise unions, old and new, claimed the right of collective wage negotiation, sometimes with support from the industrial federation, but mostly on an independent basis.

This was manifested in changes in the character and tactics of collective labor action in the years following the inauguration of the Sixth Republic. While the overall number of disputes stayed fairly high, collective action became more political and less economic in orientation and tactics more disruptive. In 1987, for example, 70.1 percent of all disputes were over wages. In 1988 51.6 percent of disputes were over pay, compared to 47.6 percent in 1989. As for the right to bargain collectively, the numbers were 16.9 percent in 1988 and 25.5 percent in 1989. Moreover, the average duration of a dispute increased to 17.8 days in 1989 from 10 days in the previous year. Most significant was the fact that 69 percent of the events for that year were deemed illegal under the Labor Dispute Adjustment Law.<sup>27</sup>

### **The Creation of the DLP and the Modality of the Transition**

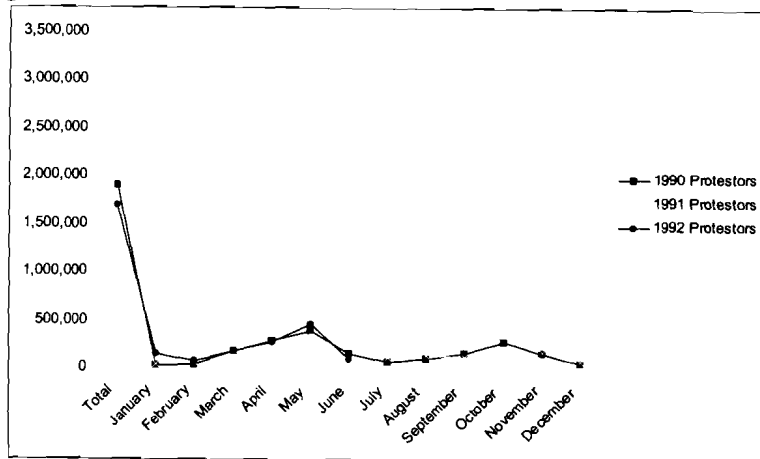
According to Valenzuela, for a democracy to reach the stage of consolidation, opposition elites have to ensure that labor moderates its demands once the initial transition is over. This proper sequence of mobilization-moderation is deemed conducive to successful democratization. This picture, however, is complicated by the electoral uncertainty surrounding the transition to democracy. The transition is more likely to be uncertain when, following several years of

authoritarianism, legislative and presidential elections are held in which the electoral strength of the ruling party and the opposition are not entirely known.

Labor moderation usually occurs when labor possesses either a mass party or a nationwide peak organization. In South Korea, however, neither of the two was the case. In 1990, moreover, the formation of the conservative super-majority Democratic Liberal Party (DLP), modeled on the LDP in Japan, ended hopes in progressive circles of a political alliance with opposition parties.<sup>28</sup> The three party merger – which took place on January 12, 1990, the same day the Korea Trade Union Congress (KTUC *Chunnohyup*) was launched – was designed to realign the conservative camp.

The government attempted to use its newly acquired 299-vote majority in the National Assembly to circumvent normal procedures and enact a series of controversial measures. Kim Dae Jung's Liberal Party for Peace and Democracy (PPD) was unable to block these measures successfully in spite of chaotic filibusters.<sup>29</sup> In a move calculated to bring a return to the extra-parliamentary tactics successfully used from 1985 to 1987, the 80-member opposition resigned in masse and called for an immediate general election (July 1990). The opposition's structural weakness, however, prevented the skillful use of mobilization to advance its goals.

**Figure 2**  
**Popular mobilization, 1990~6.1992. Units: number of**  
**protestors<sup>30</sup>**



In May of 1991, there was a dramatic and brief spike in political protest.<sup>31</sup> The trigger was news that the police had beaten a student to death during a protest the previous April 26. Protests first erupted on university campuses, but soon protestors embarked on a short period of street politics that brought about remarkable turnouts. At first, the government opted to stay away as protests escalated. The turning point came when the president announced that he would not seek a constitutional revision for a cabinet system. Almost simultaneously, it was announced that a deal for the introduction of a local administration system had been reached. The following figure reveals the extent of popular mobilization during that extraordinary month

In two polls conducted in June of 1992, the majority of respondents (80.6%) were of the opinion that the government should handle student demonstrations in a moderate and sensible way. Furthermore, 62.6% of those polled felt that student demonstrations had a positive effect on the country's political climate.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, protest activity was far from becoming institutionalized as the number of unreported protests (4,170), by definition illegal, continued to surpass that of reported incidents (642) in the last year of Roh Tae Woo's administration.<sup>33</sup>

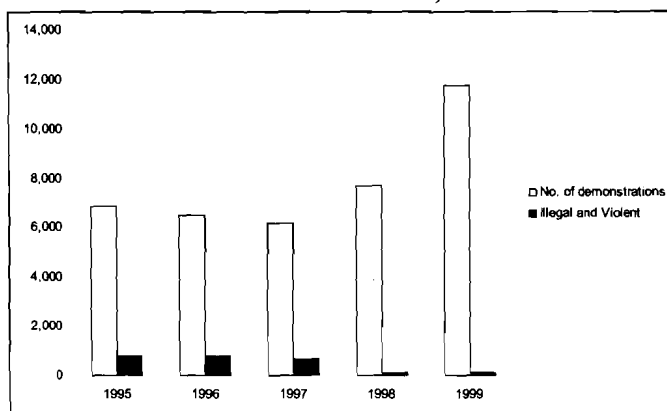
### **Kim Young Sam's "Civil Government": The Institutionalization of Protest?**

It was the election of Kim Young Sam in 1992 that some see as initiating the institutionalization of protest activity in South Korea. Kim Young Sam was the first democratically-elected civilian president in thirty-two years. His popularity, moreover, made it difficult for civil society to challenge the state based on its intrinsic legitimacy. As a result, his accomplishments and failures<sup>34</sup> form a good starting point for scholarly debates over the relative importance of "reform from above" as compared to "pressure from below". Some view democratic consolidation as a consequence of mass pressures for meaningful reforms. Still others argue that consolidation results from a combination of "reform from above" and "pressure from below". Still others view continued mobilization as dangerous, especially when representative institutions are still fragile.

Indeed, Kim Young Sam's presidency is best known for the (sometimes unintended) interplay of political reforms emanating from above and popular reaction to these initiatives, particularly in the areas of labor and prosecution of authoritarian elites for human rights violations. Encouraged by Kim's reformist offensive, some groups began to articulate a vision of civic participation centered, in the words

of Lewis, on “new, less confrontational, un-provocative, peaceful – essentially depoliticized” – means of popular participation.<sup>35</sup> The use of Molotov cocktails, steel pipes, stones, railway and road occupations, and attacks on public buildings are all examples of established forms of violent direct action in the protest repertoire of popular organizations in South Korea. Although their use declined dramatically, however, the overall level of demonstrations did not appreciably change.

**Figure 3**  
**Number of rallies and demonstrations, 1995-1999<sup>36</sup>**



Some argue that this represented a major change in the culture of protest in a democratizing context.<sup>37</sup> They cite the widely-known example of The Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice, founded in 1989<sup>38</sup>, as an example of a social movement trying to work within rather than outside of the system.<sup>39</sup> Other groups, however, continued their militancy in the face of popular disenchantment with their tactics. The student movement, for example, became more radical and less influential by the mid 1990s.<sup>40</sup> In response to public criticism of its violent tactics, student activists renamed their organization the National Federation of University Student Councils (or *Hanch’ongryon*).<sup>41</sup> As late as 1996, college students remained highly visible participants in the May 18 anniversary festivities held annually in Kwangju.

Most importantly, Kim’s globalization blueprint spelled more trouble in the area of industrial relations. The government’s policy handed labor limited political incorporation, but the unions did not respond favorably by moderating their behavior. Quite the contrary, they vigorously pursued the cause of democratic unionism, mainly through the use of strikes and other disruptive actions. In June 1993 the Korean Council of Trade Union Representatives (KCTU,

*Chonnodae*) brought together leaders of all "democratic" trade unions into a single national body. In the summer of 1994, almost 100,000 workers walked off their jobs, many of them associated with *Chonnodae*. This strike combined economic demands with the fight for independent trade unions. Not since the "Great Workers' Struggle" in the summer of 1987, moreover, had there been such an impressive show of force by workers.

On November 13, 1994, democratic unionists launched the Preparatory Committee for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The Committee's main task was to prepare and facilitate the reorganization of individual unions into various industrial federations and the formation of the Confederation. This led to a nationwide struggle in 1995 against a new wage curb policy driven by government and employers. As a show of strength, a national workers' rally was organized by representatives of over a thousand individual unions. On November 23, 1995, KCTU (*Minju Noch'ong*) applied to the Ministry of Labor for "acquisition of legality" after being officially established with 862 enterprise unions and a total membership of 418,000.

Finally, social protests surfaced nationwide in late 1995 regarding the issue of confronting and grappling with the authoritarian past. After a year-long investigation of the military putsch of December 1979 and the Kwangju Massacre, the government confirmed in October 1994 that Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo had engineered a military revolt. The Kim government announced in July 1995, however, that it would not pursue insurrection charges because the statute of limitations on these crimes had expired.

Students immediately reacted with a nationwide boycott of classes.<sup>42</sup> A Committee of 297 civil society groups collected signatures from one million citizens, calling for the imprisonment of Roh and held rallies attended by tens of thousands of students and regular citizens.<sup>43</sup> Throughout November 1995, thousands of students, workers, movement activists, and ordinary citizens waged street demonstrations in Seoul and other major cities of the country.<sup>44</sup> Yielding to popular pressure, the government finally prosecuted Chun and Roh in early 1996 on multiple charges of bribery, insurrection, and treason.<sup>45</sup>

### **Class Conflict and the 'High Tech' General Strike**

But it is perhaps South Korea's first general strike that best highlights the role that political protest can play in a democratizing context. This is because the 'high tech' general strike, as some refer to it, took place not during the transition to democracy, but when some were beginning to speak of the ROK as a consolidated democracy. This does not contradict the reality of the strike's extraordinary degree

of organization, which was choreographed with great skill by workers and law enforcement officials. The strike, however, involved various unions from different sectors of the economy, and it directly challenged the political regime. The political nature of the South Korean general strike was universally recognized.

As early as 1994, Kim Young Sam had signaled his intention to reform the labor code, criticized as outdated and repressive. Reform bureaucrats had favored legalizing the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and repealing clauses that prohibited union's political activities by unions. The environment was favorable, since Kim's government was eager to join the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

The strategy of getting labor to allow greater employer flexibility in exchange for political recognition, however, failed in garnering labor support. Leaders of both the conservative FKTU and the progressive KCTU defended Korea's traditional system of lifetime employment and seniority while calling for an immediate lifting of the three prohibitions. The KCTU representatives in particular argued that the ban on multiple unionism undermined the freedom of association of workers and was inconsistent with international practice. Furthermore, they asked for the right of government employees and teachers to unionize and the end of restrictions on collective bargaining for certain strategic sectors such as the defense industry.

Businesses vetoed any compromise with the unions. The ruling party, which responded to the interests of the *chaebol*, endorsed a "*chaebol* law" enshrining lay-offs and delaying the legalization of the KCTU for another three years. Despite criticism from opposition parties, which made it clear that the bill stood no chance of passing, the ruling party rammed the bills through the National Assembly in a predawn session without the presence of opposition legislators.

The demonstrations of December 1996 and January 1997 did not reach the scale of the 'Great Struggle' of 1987 and did not bring the country to a standstill. The number of individual unions and organized workers who took part in the General Strike for at least one day amounted to 528 and 403,179 respectively. This accounted for 81.1% of the total membership of KCTU, but less than 10% of Korea's workforce. Nevertheless, they forced the New Korea Party to amend the Labor Code in March of 1997 to make it more amenable to labor's demands. Albeit minor, the revisions led to a profound realignment of electoral and legislative politics, increasing the legitimacy and depth of electoral democracy.

## Kim Dae Jung's 'Participatory Market Economy': Democratic Consolidation?

As Western industrialized democratic nations have shown, democratic consolidation is a process of managing social tensions and resolving political conflicts through the incorporation of subordinate groups into the institutional circle of politics. In this respect, the dawning of the IMF stewardship regime in December 1997 coincided with a historical political transition in which Kim Dae Jung became the first opposition party candidate to be elected President since the founding of the Republic in 1948. Kim Dae Jung had campaigned on the theme of a 'democratic market economy,' balancing efficiency through the market place with participation through political institutions. Having been elected with KCTU support,<sup>46</sup> he was the first politician to form a political coalition with labor.<sup>47</sup>

The economic collapse, however, created an urgent sense of national crisis which permeated all Korean institutions.<sup>48</sup> Recognizing that the understanding between the IMF and the outgoing Kim Young Sam government would provoke fierce resistance from both the *chaebols* and the unions, Kim Dae-jung established the first of what were to be four Tripartite Commissions in January 1998. Unlike previous government overtures to unions and employers, the Commission was a serious attempt to create a genuine national negotiation forum involving all stakeholders. Members included eleven senior figures from the government, the main political parties, the KCTU, the FKTU, and business.<sup>49</sup>

The IMF-mandated reforms, however, have been interpreted by the unions as an attack on workers' jobs and livelihoods. KCTU leaders in particular have resorted to large demonstrations and strikes<sup>50</sup>, such as a general strike in the summer of 2003 involving 134 unions and about 66,000 members, including the country's three automobile manufacturing groups. In this situation, unions have fended off government appeals to the national interest.<sup>51</sup> This has been particularly true in heavy industry. Major strikes involving workers at Hyundai, Daewoo, the shipyards and the electrical power industry broke out in 1998-2002, and these were followed in 2003 by strikes in the transportation, manufacturing and chemical sectors. In many cases these were the subject of violent repression by law and order forces. The arrests and the use of repressive legislation by the incumbent Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-) has led in some extreme cases to a return to the methods of suicide and/or self-immolation by union leaders.

## Conclusion

Sandoval argues that there is a significant correlation between, on the one hand, the degree of democratic regime stability, and, on the other, the degree to which social movements remain autonomous and allied to opposition elites during a democratic transition. After a founding election that results in a reordering of the political and electoral fields, active civil society organizations face a choice: continued mobilization or subordination to more influential political forces. Particularly in countries where the opposition to authoritarianism played a significant role before the transition<sup>52</sup>, democracy creates a dilemma: how much to oppose new incumbents and by what means.

This approach, however, ignores the possibility that even when social movements fail to be incorporated in the political process through alliances with the opposition, other outcomes are overlooked that point to structural transformations and changes in their capacity to remain key political actors. South Korea's first progressive political force – the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) – serves as an example that long-term mobilization can have a positive effect on the politics of democratic consolidation. The DLP originated from People's Victory 21, a political alliance organized by the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) to field candidates in the 1997 presidential election and in the 1998 local elections. Succeeding Peoples' Victory 21, the preliminary Committee for a Progressive Party was organized in 1999. This was followed by the launching of the DLP in January 2000.

The DLP describes itself as “a political party of workers, peasantry, urban poor, small businessmen, women, students and progressive intellectuals.”<sup>53</sup> In 2002, it emerged in third position, winning 8.1 percent of the party vote in the June local elections. In the 2002 presidential election, the DLP's candidate, Kwon Young-ghil, gained 3.9% of votes. Unprecedented by Korean standards, in April 2004 the DLP became the first political force in South Korean history to gain parliamentary representation by winning 10 seats in the 299-member single legislature.<sup>54</sup> The DLP's platform features a 40-hour, five-day work week, mandatory hiring of unemployed youth, guarantees of public sector workers' labor rights and worker participation in management. This is likely to lead to a more progressive social policy and hence a broader legitimation of electoral democracy, both significant accomplishments given South Korea's paltry record in the area of social democratization.



## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia L. Hipsher, "Democratization and the Decline of Urban Social Movements in Chile and Spain," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 28 (1996), pp. 273-297.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "Myths of Moderation: Confrontation and Conflict during Democratic Transitions," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 29 (1997), pp. 305-322.

<sup>4</sup> Leonardo Avritzer, "Democratization and Changes in the Patterns of Association in Brazil," *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs*, vol. 42 (2000), pp. 59-76.

<sup>5</sup> Scott Mainwaring, Guillermo O'Donnell, and J. Samuel Valenzuela, eds., *Issues in Democratic Consolidation: The New South American Democracies in Comparative Perspective*, South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992.

<sup>6</sup> John Higley and Richard Gunther, eds., *Elites and Democratic Consolidation in Latin America and Southern Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.

<sup>7</sup> Nancy Bermeo, "Democracy and the Lessons of Dictatorship," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 24 (1992), pp. 273-291.

<sup>8</sup> Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Ruth Berins Collier and James Mahoney, "Adding Collective Actors to Collective Outcomes: Labor and Recent Democratization in South America and Southern Europe," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 29 (1997): pp. 285-303.

<sup>10</sup> Students of democratic transitions have tended to view labor movements as too radical and hence as instigating fear among moderates and reformers who then act to restraint them. See Przeworski, *Democracy and the Market*, for an elaboration of this logic.

<sup>11</sup> J. Samuel Valenzuela, "Labor Movements in Transitions to Democracy," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 21 (1991), pp. 446-472.

<sup>12</sup> Another example of widespread political protest in the initial stages of democratization is Poland. See Grzegorz Ekiert and Jan Kubik, "Contentious Politics in New Democracies: East Germany, Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, 1989-93," *World Politics*, vol. 50 (1998), pp. 547-581.

---

<sup>13</sup> It included, *inter alia*, a constitutional revision introducing direct presidential elections, human rights guarantees, the lifting of press restrictions, the encouragement of local and university autonomy, and the promotion of political parties

<sup>14</sup> Hagen Koo, "Middle Classes, Democratization, and Class Formation: The Case of South Korea," *Theory and Society*, vol. 20 (1991), pp. 485-509.

<sup>15</sup> Ho-Chul, Sonn, "The 'Late Blooming' of the South Korean Labor Movement," *Monthly Review*, July/August, 1997, p. 117-29.

<sup>16</sup> "South Korea: Troubled Transition – Korean Labor Movement's Woes Raise Doubts about Its Survival," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 9, 1987.

<sup>17</sup> Status of the Republic of Korea, vol. 19 (Labor, Sports and Tourism). See Articles 13.1 and 15.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, Article 32.

<sup>19</sup> Young-bum Park, ed., "Labor in Korea," Seoul, Korea: Korea Labor Institute, p. 581.

<sup>20</sup> Hanspeter Kriesi, "The Political Opportunity Structure of New Social Movements: Its Impact on their Mobilization," in *The Politics of Social Protest: Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements*, edited by J. Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 169-198.

<sup>21</sup> "Official Apology and Reconciliation Programme for Kwangju Uprising," *Keesing's Record of World Events*, July 1988.  
<http://keesings.gvpi.net/keesings/lpext.dll?f=templates&fn=main-h.htm>.

<sup>22</sup> On the morning of May 18, 1980 paratroopers charged with enforcing Martial Law Decree No. 10 began assaulting student protestors in the city of Kwangju. As protest spread to regular citizens, the troops lost control of the situation and opened fire on unarmed civilians. A full scale insurrection ensued, resulting in 170 dead and 380 wounded. Gi-Wook Shin and Moon Hwang Kyung, eds., *Contentious Kwangju: The May 18 Uprising in Korea's Past and Present*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, p. xvii.

<sup>23</sup> Police Annual Report, National Police Agency, 1991 and 1992. As reported in the Bureau of Auditing and Inspections, 16<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

<sup>24</sup> See Table 2 for a complete breakdown.

<sup>25</sup> Su-wan Lee, "Roh Orders Crackdown on Violence, Illegal Labour Disputes," *Reuters News*, December 28, 1988.

---

<sup>26</sup> "South Korean Bill Calls for Seven Years for Firebombers," *Reuters News*, February 9, 1989.

<sup>27</sup> "Organized Teachers Retreat in Clash with Government," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, November 4, 1993.

<sup>28</sup> The other two conservative parties merging with the DJP were Kim Young Sam's Reunification Democratic Party (RDP) and Kim Jong Pil's New Democratic Republican Party (NDRP).

<sup>29</sup> "Mass Resignation of Opposition Legislators," *Keesing's Record of World Events*, July 1990.

<sup>30</sup> National Police Agency (1992), 81-91.

<sup>31</sup> "May Struggle Against Violent Regime Demands Establishment of Democratic Government," *The Granite Tower*, Korea University, June 1, 1991.

<sup>32</sup> "In your opinion, do student and other dissidents exert a positive influence on our country's politics and social development? Or do they exert a negative influence?" *Gallup Korea* poll, 11 November-20 November 1992. <http://www.gallup.co.kr/>.

<sup>33</sup> Police Annual Report, National Police Agency, 1991 and 1992. As reported in the Bureau of Auditing and Inspections, 16<sup>th</sup> National Assembly.

<sup>34</sup> These included, among others, intensive anti-corruption campaigns, a "real name" financial system, political reform bills, and tighter civilian control of the military.

<sup>35</sup> Linda S. Lewis, "Commemorating Kwangju: The 5.18 Movement and Civil Society at the Millennium," in *Korean Society: Civil Society, Democracy, and the State*, edited by Charles K. Armstrong, Routledge, p. 178.

<sup>36</sup> Status of Illegal and Violent Demonstrations. National Police Agency Statistics. [http://www.police.go.kr/data/statistics/statisticDefense\\_01.jsp](http://www.police.go.kr/data/statistics/statisticDefense_01.jsp).

<sup>37</sup> As specified by the Demonstration and Assembly Act (1989, 1997), any public gathering of more than two individuals qualifies as a demonstration and thus requires prior approval. See Status of the Republic of Korea, volume 2 (Court, Judicial Affairs, Police).

<sup>38</sup> CCEJ (*Kyongsillyŏn*) was established "in response to the extremely unjust structure of Korean economic life" exemplified by big-business-government collusion, environmental degradation, and the postponement of genuine democratic development. <http://www.rightlivelivelihood.se/recipe/2003/ccej.htm>.

---

<sup>39</sup> See Lewis 2003, p. 178.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> "Student Organization Says It would Do Away with Excessive Acts," *Yonhap News*, October 14, 1994.

<sup>42</sup> "Students to Boycott Classes, Protesting May 18 Decision," *Yonhap News*, September 20, 1995.

<sup>43</sup> "Student Activists to Stage Sit-ins at DLP Office, Other Buildings," *Yonhap News*, September 29, 1995.

<sup>44</sup> "Rallies, Demonstrations Scheduled to Protest May 18 Decision," *Yonhap News*, September 30, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> *Korea Times*, January 25, 1996.

<sup>46</sup> "KCTU Meets Kim," *Labor-L*, December 28, 1997.

<sup>47</sup> Kim Dae Jung drew support from the lower classes in urban and rural areas. His populist appeals inspired workers and mobilized their political support.

<sup>48</sup> Koo 2001, p. 202.

<sup>49</sup> Cheol-soo Lee, "Law and Labour-Management Relations in South Korea: Advancing Industrial Democratization," in *Law and Labour Market Regulation in East Asia*, edited by Sean Cooney, Tim Lindsey, Richard Mitchell and Ying Zhu, Routledge, 2002, pp. 215-245.

<sup>50</sup> "No Letup in Strikes as KCTU Mobilizes," *The Chosun Ilbo*, June 25, 2003.

<sup>51</sup> "Nation Feared to Enter 'Tunnel of Crisis' Amid Social Instability," *Yonhap News*, November 23, 2003.

<sup>52</sup> In the late 1980s and early 1990s, popular protest movements set in motion a global wave of democratization of authoritarian and one-party regimes. Nineteen one-party states in Africa were forced to institutionalize democracy in the early 1990s. From Asia to Africa, mass protest movements demanded an end to authoritarian rule. Even mini-states such as Nepal and Haiti held democratic elections. John Walton and David Seddon, *Free Markets and Food Riots: The Politics of Global Adjustment*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.kdnp.org/>.

<sup>54</sup> "The 2004 Elections: A Groundbreaking and Unique Event," *Korea Herald*, 25 April 2004.