

Demilitarization of South Korea's Military Junta and Its Significance: A Transactional Perspective

Huatai Chen

*Department of Russian Language and Linguistics, Shenzhen MSU-BIT University, Shenzhen, China
1120251033@smbu.edu.cn*

Abstract. The developmental miracle of South Korea during the era of military junta rule in the last century has attracted worldwide attention. The success of its democratization is often portrayed as the outcome of civic resistance and international pressure, yet this overlooks the fact that both factors were present in the democratic transitions of most countries under military rule— Among which peaceful transitions were hardly the norm. By comparison, South Korea's transactional democratization under military rule offers valuable lessons. Pressured by the easing of tensions on the Korean Peninsula and a crisis of legitimacy, the military-political elites, in order to avoid the risk of prosecution and maximize their interests, gradually engaged in bargains with the civilian government and the chaebol, facilitating democratic transition. Through this concrete exchange of interests, South Korea finally saw the emergence of a democratic republic after five successive military juntas, giving rise to a distinctive path of peaceful "transactional democratization" by the military. Study of this path enriches the comparative cases for the problem of military-civilian decoupling in diverse Global South countries, and may also offer insights into addressing the entrenched collusion between chaebols and politicians in contemporary South Korea.

Keywords: South Korean military junta, demilitarization, Chun Doo-hwan, Roh Tae-woo, developing countries

1. Introduction

A highly centralized government is often regarded as a fast track for backward countries to catch up with advanced ones—a point Juan Linz has already made in his theory of developmental authoritarianism, or developmental dictatorship. However, authoritarian governments are generally suited only to the catch-up phase; once their historical mission is accomplished, the central challenge becomes how to achieve a peaceful transition that preserves developmental gains to the greatest extent possible. In the third wave of global democratization at the end of the 20th century [1], the transition of South Korea's military junta is universally recognized as a success story [2]. Yet unlike Japan, where transition was driven by external forces, or Argentina, where it was led by the opposition, the peaceful democratization of South Korea's military junta displayed pronounced characteristics of proactive, self-initiated reform. The military junta, which held a monopoly on violence, ultimately refrained from large-scale violent suppression of protesting citizens during the

June 1987 Democratic Struggle. Instead, it issued the June 29 Declaration, which called for direct presidential elections [3], and over the course of the three subsequent administrations, military elites were systematically phased out from the center of political decision-making.

Faced with collapsing legitimacy, soaring repression costs, and intensified pressure from the Reagan administration, the military-political elite bloc proactively ceded part of its political power and surveillance functions in exchange for fundamental interests such as judicial immunity, locked-in defense budgets, and intelligence authority over North Korea [4], thereby achieving peaceful democratization and maximizing the preservation of developmental achievements.

2. The historical process of transactional transition in South Korea's military junta

2.1. The legitimacy deficit of the military junta

The December 12 Coup. After the assassination of Park Chung-hee in 1979, Chun Doo-hwan, then Commander of the Defense Security Command, seized military power through a mutiny on December 12, relying on his "Hanahoe" (One Mind Society) network. This coup lacked any legal authorization and was accomplished purely through the violent efficiency of Chun Doo-hwan's personal connections within the military, establishing the illegitimate foundation of the new military rule.

Suppression of the Gwangju Uprising. In May 1980, Chun Doo-hwan dispatched airborne brigades to suppress the Gwangju democratic movement, causing massive civilian casualties. This exposed the regime's pretense of maintaining order and became a stain that no subsequent amnesty or immunity could fully remove [5]. The legitimacy crisis began to surface and gave rise to a collective fear among the military junta of future prosecution.

The June Democratic Struggle and Military Refusal to Obey Orders. In 1987, following the torture and death of university student Park Jong-chol, million-strong demonstrations broke out nationwide. A significant number of frontline soldiers adopted a posture of passive compliance or outright refusal to carry out orders. The governing crisis caused by the failure of violence brought transactional solutions to the table.

2.2. The concrete unfolding of interest exchanges during the Roh Tae-woo period

- Exchange One: The June 29 Declaration — Roh Tae-woo accepted direct presidential elections in exchange for amnesty for Chun Doo-hwan. Although Roh Tae-woo was still elected president at the end of 1987 amid allegations of electoral manipulation, and Chun Doo-hwan secured a safe exit, the direct presidential election system was formally institutionalized. - Exchange Two: The military severed campus and media surveillance in exchange for independent military personnel appointments and a defense budget that would only increase. Henceforth, defense spending was locked at approximately 30% of the national budget, and promotions within the military were entirely determined by career officers, free from civilian government interference.

- Exchange Three: Stabilization of policy support in exchange for chaebol political donations. During the military's retreat, guarantees of policy continuity and continued access to low-interest loans were exchanged for massive electoral funds for Roh Tae-woo from major conglomerates, including Hyundai and Samsung, along with commitments from the chaebol to cooperate with industrial restructuring [6].

2.3. The civilian government's final resolution of the military junta's "secret police apparatus"

The former Agency for National Security Planning lost its primary authorizing body for domestic surveillance after the fall of the military junta. When the agency was exposed for political interference during the 1997 presidential election, the military's substantial North Korea-related budget—under the civilian government's Sunshine Policy framework—paved the way for its peaceful transformation into the National Intelligence Service (NIS). The NIS is now fully subject to civilian oversight. Through this process, the military regime's domestic apparatus for political violence was comprehensively dismantled [7].

3. Summary of motivations and characteristics of the military junta's proactive transactional democratization

3.1. The impetus of civil society resistance

O'Donnell and Schmitter regarded the revival of civil society as the prelude to authoritarian liberalization. In South Korea, the large-scale street demonstrations involving students, white-collar workers, and the middle class during the June 1987 Democratic Struggle—while they did not lead to the military's proactive institutional withdrawal, nor did they directly cause regime collapse—nonetheless exerted considerable pressure on the Chun Doo-hwan junta through eroding legitimacy and rising costs of repression. Many countries have likewise experienced large-scale resistance but slid directly into civil war or coercive backlash. South Korea's specificity lay in the fact that civil society resistance was not met with immediate large-scale suppression, thus providing a "window of opportunity" for intra-elite transactions and facilitating the issuance of the June 29 Declaration [8].

3.2. The rationality of elite strategic choice

Przeworski's game-theoretic model of democratic transitions indicates [9] that when moderates within the authoritarian bloc realize that the marginal cost of repression exceeds the expected loss of compromise, they choose to reach institutional arrangements with the opposition. In South Korea, these moderates were precisely the younger generals of the Hanahoe faction, with Roh Tae-woo as their leading figure. After careful calculation, they concluded that rather than sticking with Chun Doo-hwan's hardline approach of maintaining high-risk direct rule under conditions of mounting pressure from the Reagan administration and continuously rising repression costs driven by civic resistance, it was preferable to guide the transition in a controlled manner while the situation was still manageable. In doing so, they could exchange low-risk guarantees for the maximum legitimate survival of existing interests, future continuing benefits, and personal physical security [10].

3.3. U.S. diplomatic pressure

South Korea's military was deeply controlled by the United States in intelligence, personnel, and military equipment, lacking the capacity for autonomous operation. Economically, South Korea was export-oriented and was highly dependent on the United States for foreign debt, foreign investment, and commodity exports. The U.S. government, through its ambassador in Seoul, directly delivered a personal letter from President Reagan to Chun Doo-hwan, pressuring him with the withdrawal of all external support for the regime—an action that inevitably exerted enormous pressure on the entire military junta elite bloc [11].

4. Contemporary significance of analyzing South Korea's transactional democratization as a case sample

4.1. Significance for South Korea's internal problems

Studying the historical details of the transition transactions enables a deeper understanding of the structural roots of the persistent difficulty in eradicating conservative forces in contemporary South Korea. The military elites who still held power at the time of the June 29 Declaration did not simply hand over the regime; rather, while ceding direct political power on the conditions of amnesty, budget guarantees, and personnel independence, they embedded their personnel networks and ideological legacies into the nascent democratic institutions. To this day, informal interpersonal networks centered on remnants of Hanahoe persist within the South Korean military, continuously exerting conservative influence on security policy and North Korea policy through retired generals entering politics and the business world. Transactional democratization was essentially a paid exit rather than a thorough reckoning; old elites, while relinquishing direct ruling power, retained a considerable degree of agenda-setting capacity. This insight also offers a path for further civilizing military-civilian relations in contemporary South Korea: since the initial transition was accomplished through transactions, the subsequent stripping away of conservative remnants can likewise draw on transactional logic, gradually reducing the space for informal networks through new rounds of interest swapping.

4.2. Implications for global south countries handling democratic transitions

In comparison with Latin American countries such as Brazil and Argentina, the South Korean model provides a more predictable exit scheme for countries that have experienced martial law rule. After their transitions, Latin American countries generally faced strong military resistance to reckoning, with reconciliation processes marked by repeated tug-of-war; South Korea, by contrast, proactively designed a series of concrete arrangements during the transition window—including judicial immunity, budget lock-in, and functional transformation—providing military elites with clear security expectations, substantially reducing the risk of direct violent coups, and minimizing leftover problems after regime handover. Furthermore, unlike the Philippines, where factionalization of the military after Marcos's downfall led to a prolonged security dilemma, South Korea—although the reprofessionalization of its military had some impact on its military soft power—largely maintained the integrity of its defense system through transactional peaceful regime transfer. If this peaceful and efficient model can be effectively drawn upon, it could provide robust support for peaceful democratic transitions.

4.3. Limitations of drawing on the case

It is worth noting that South Korea's transactional democratic transition involved a number of special conditions that are difficult to replicate: the direct threat from North Korea, which justified the existence of military forces and military elites; the effective pressure capacity of the United States; and the various development opportunities and special political-economic environment conferred by its peculiar status as a Cold War frontline. For Global South countries lacking these conditions, the more important lesson of the South Korean experience lies in its core logic—treating transition as a negotiable interest-based game rather than an unyielding zero-sum game, reducing the resistance costs of vested interest groups through compensation mechanisms so that violent conflict

becomes cost-ineffective, thereby advancing peaceful democratization to the greatest extent possible, so as to maximize the preservation of developmental gains and sustain developmental momentum.

4.4. Theoretical contributions and governance dilemmas

At the theoretical level, this case advances the systematization of the "interest exchange thesis" in democratic transition studies and complicates the narrative that "civil society resistance inevitably triumphs." The South Korean experience demonstrates once again that successful democratic transition is often not a simple matter of resistance in which force determines the victor, but rather the outcome of mutual transactions among various actors within complex real-world contradictions and interest disputes under specific historical circumstances. Civil society resistance provided transition pressure and a window of opportunity, but whether a peaceful transition could ultimately be achieved depended on the cost-benefit calculations of moderates within the authoritarian camp and their ability to reach credible commitments with the opposition. This finding supplements O'Donnell and Schmitter's elite negotiation theory and provides East Asian empirical corroboration for Przeworski's game-theoretic model. However, the South Korean case also reveals the inherent dilemma of transactional transitions: during the transition, the regime transactions between the military junta and the civilian government could easily occupy most of the elites' field of vision, thereby systematically neglecting the long-term influence of the chaebol as a hidden participant. Such shortsightedness could then, under the new democratic framework, breed structural collusion between old economic oligarchs and new political elites. The corruption scandals of successive South Korean presidents and the chaebols' privileges above the law can all find their institutional roots in the transition agreements of the late 1980s [12].

5. Conclusion

Through its transactional peaceful democratic transition between 1987 and 1997, South Korea basically completed the peaceful severance between military and civilian spheres within a mere decade, creating a landmark achievement in democratic transition among late-developing countries. At the institutional level, the ability of military officer cliques to directly interfere in elections and cabinet composition greatly diminished, and no successful military coup has occurred since 1987. At the economic level, the country did not experience large-scale capital flight or economic collapse due to regime change; the industrial policy system and export-oriented structure built up during the Park Chung-hee era continued to generate growth under the democratic framework, enabling South Korea to join the ranks of high-income economies in the 1990s. At the social level, freedom of speech, freedom of association, and labor rights received institutional guarantees. These achievements prove that although transactional democratic transition is somewhat deficient in moral narrative, it is highly effective in concretely preserving developmental achievements and maintaining developmental momentum, in practice offering a practical reference path relatively conducive to national security, development, and improving living standards.

Yet the limitations and hidden dangers of the transaction model likewise cannot be ignored. First, the model failed to fundamentally eradicate the informal conservative networks within the military; Hanahoe members, by entering politics and joining think tanks after retirement, continue to exert right-wing influence on security and historical issues, causing deep societal rifts over North Korea policy and historical interpretation. Second, and more fatally, the chaebols grew into super-entities capable of swaying politics during the transaction process—they hijack policy through political

donations, suppress innovation through illegitimate market competition, disrupt market order, and have formed the "chaebol republic" predicament that remains the most intractable problem in post-democratization South Korea. Third, the military underwent large-scale personnel turnover during reprofessionalization, leaving a strategic vacuum of nearly a decade in the defense system. Finally, although the amnesty for Chun Doo-hwan and others was a necessary price for peaceful transition, it also resulted in the deferral of historical justice; the spiritual trauma of the Gwangju incident still lingers in South Korea's political culture to this day.

Within the lineage of democratic transition theory, the core contribution of the South Korean case lies in its systematic demonstration that "rational risk avoidance by military-political elites" is an important causal mechanism that, together with "civil society resistance" and "international pressure," constitutes the primary driving force of transactional democratic transition. Traditional theories tend to portray democratization as a moral drama in which civic forces defeat authoritarianism, but the South Korean experience reveals a more complex reality: moderates within the authoritarian camp do not passively wait to be overthrown; rather, at the tipping point where the cost of repression outweighs the cost of compromise, they proactively design and lead the transition, converting violent capital into guaranteed legitimate benefits under the new system. This is not to belittle the value of civic resistance—without the governing crisis created by the June Struggle, the transaction window would never have opened. But it must also be recognized that civic resistance does not operate in isolation; isolated resistance that cannot be embedded in an appropriate social environment tends to come to naught and may even undermine social stability.

South Korea's transition experience ultimately directs reflection toward a more fundamental developmental proposition: after late-developing countries complete their economic catch-up during the authoritarian phase, how should they handle the "creative transformation" of authoritarian legacies? South Korea's lesson is that a carefully designed interest compensation mechanism—providing supervised legitimate budgets for security agencies, offering conditional judicial immunity to transition-era elites, and finding new institutional outlets for the old system's professional functions—can significantly reduce old elites' resistance to democratization and diminish the violent risks of transition, thereby enabling peaceful transition that maximizes the preservation of developmental achievements and maintains developmental momentum. But South Korea's cautionary lesson is equally profound: transition architects must examine all participants in the transaction with a longer-term perspective, guarding against chaebols or specific interest groups from locking in privileges during the transition, and preventing the formation of new oligarchic domination under the guise of new democratic institutions. How to strip away repressive legacies while inheriting developmental achievements, and how to strike a balance between the realism of elite transactions and the idealism of civic justice, remains an institutional challenge common to all Global South countries pursuing good governance.

References

- [1] Lindberg, S. I. (2026). Fifty years of the third wave(s): From democratization to autocratization. *Democratization*, 33(3), 676–694. DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2026.2615134. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/13510347.2026.2615134>
- [2] Haggard, S., & Kaufman, R. R. (2016). Democratization during the third wave. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19, 125–144. DOI: 10.1146/annurev-polisci-042114-015137. Available at: <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-polisci-042114-015137>
- [3] Yun, S. (2023). *Two-track democracy in South Korea: The interplay between institutional politics and contentious politics*. Routledge. London. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780367853082>

- [4] Iakovlev, G. (2023). Preconditions for pacted transitions from authoritarian rule. *European Political Science Review*, 15(2), 254–271. DOI: 10.1017/S1755773922000273. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/81316EEEEA4E55E1120C3BC212DA1A254/S1755773922000273a.pdf>
- [5] Kim, H. J. (2021). A tale of two commissions: Explaining the different trajectories of human rights movements in Korea. *Peacebuilding*, 9(2), 175–189. DOI: 10.1080/21647259.2021.1895620. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/21647259.2021.1895620>
- [6] Wannawit, R. (2025). *Civil-military relations, democratic consolidation and civilian control: Insights from South Korea's experience and prospects for Thailand*. Master's Thesis, Centre for East Asian Studies, University of Turku. Available at: https://www.utupub.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/182238/Wannawit_Ratchada_Thesis.pdf
- [7] Croissant, A. (2004). Riding the tiger: Civilian control and the military in democratizing Korea. *Armed Forces & Society*, 30(3), 357–381. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095327X0403000303>
- [8] Saxer, C. J. (2003). Democratic transition and institutional crafting: The South Korean case. *Democratization*, 10(2), 45–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714000127>
- [9] Przeworski, A. (1991). *Democracy and the market: Political and economic reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. Cambridge University Press. Cambridge. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139172493>
- [10] Acemoglu, D., & Robinson, J. A. (2001). A theory of political transitions. *American Economic Review*, 91(4), 938–963. Available at: <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/64163/theoryofpolitica00acem.pdf>
- [11] Stueck, W. (1998). Democratization in Korea: The United States role, 1980 and 1987. *International Journal of Korean Studies*, 2(1), 5–30. Available at: https://icks.org/data/ijks/1482384986_add_file_1.pdf
- [12] Fleckenstein, T., & Lee, S. C. (2026). What has happened to the poster child: Is South Korean democracy backsliding? *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. DOI: 10.1080/00472336.2026.2650155. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00472336.2026.2650155>