

Korea Briefing, 1990

Edited by
Chong-Sik Lee





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Chong-Sik Lee

Published in cooperation with
The Asia Society

Deborah Field Washburn,
Series Editor

First published 1991 by Westview Press

Published 2018 by Routledge
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

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Library of Congress ISSN: 1053-4806
ISBN 0-8133-8009-X
ISBN 0-8133-8010-3 (pbk.)

ISBN 13: 978-0-367-01555-8 (hbk)

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Preface

The Asia Society is pleased to introduce this first volume of *Korea Briefing*, an annual review of domestic and international trends and events in the Republic of Korea. *Korea Briefing* follows upon two other annual reviews published by the Society, *China Briefing*, begun in 1980, and *India Briefing*, which recently published its fourth volume. All three books are copublished by The Asia Society and Westview Press. The Asia Society is a nonprofit, nonpartisan educational organization dedicated to increasing understanding by Americans of Asia and its importance to the United States and the world at large.

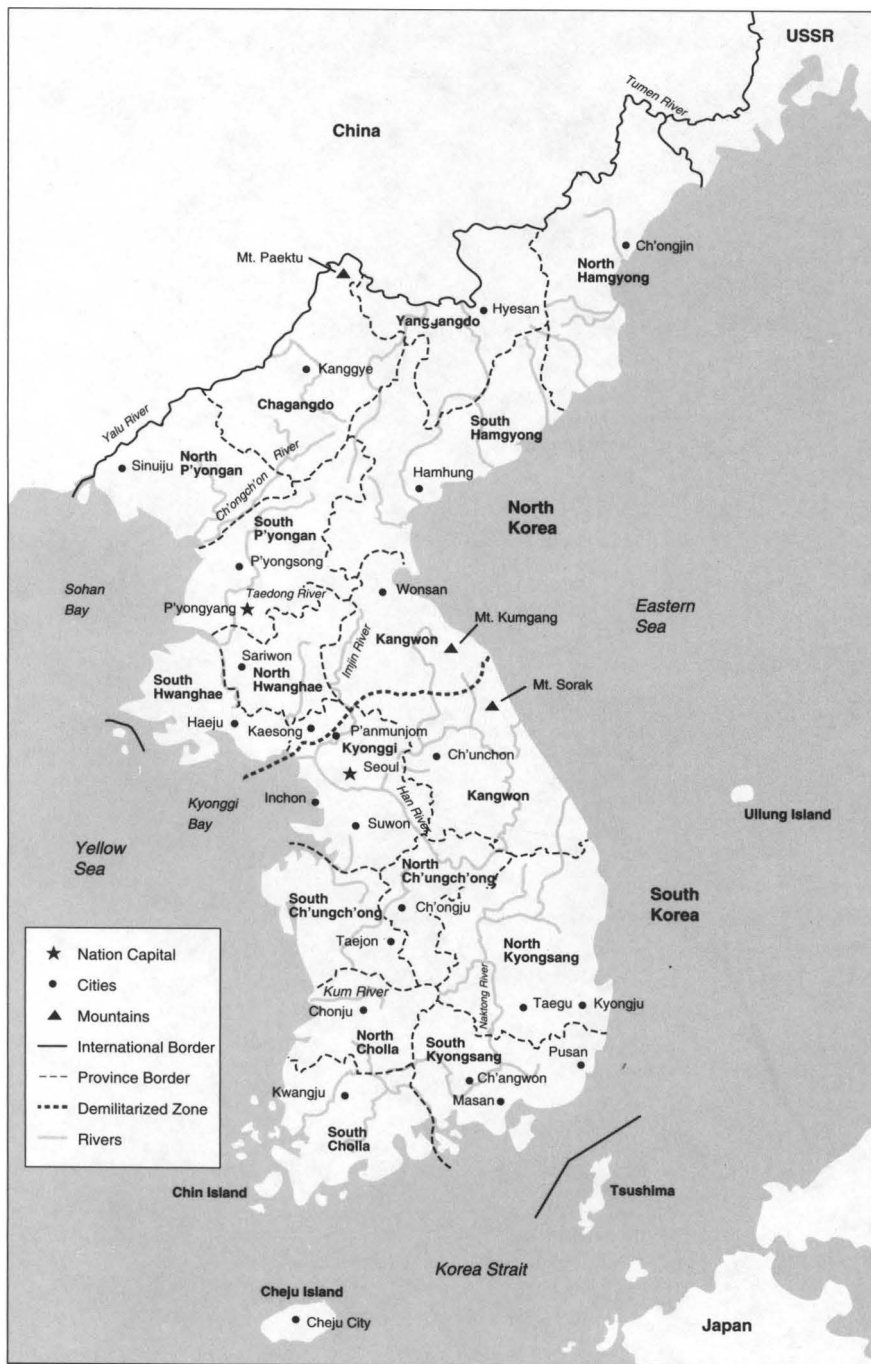
Public and scholarly interest in Korea is higher than ever today in the United States. A "take-off" in Korean studies and public education about Korea has occurred. The Asia Society has played an active part in fostering this new interest. In addition to *Korea Briefing* and other publications, the Society sponsors policy studies and public education programs relating to this very important part of Asia.

As this book goes to press, the South and North Korean prime ministers have just met in Seoul at a high level, and a second meeting, in Pyongyang, is imminent. No one can suppose a quick solution to deep-seated issues that still generate high levels of tension. Yet the events of the world continue to surprise us, suggesting that not even strategic arrangements are permanent. In the meantime, South Korea's economy is projected to grow at an annual rate of more than 9 percent in 1990, a respectable advance over the 1989 level. Its experiment in democracy continues to take hold. The nation plays new roles in world affairs. These and other themes are treated in depth in the chapters that follow.

I wish to thank Professor Chong-Sik Lee for commissioning and critiquing the chapters and to express my appreciation to him and the other six authors for their fine job of chapter preparation and revision. The Society is grateful to Susan McEachern and her colleagues at Westview Press for their support of the new series.

Several individuals played significant roles in the preparation of this volume. Asia Society Senior Editor Deborah Field Washburn and Publications Assistant Andrea Sokerka guided the book through the editorial and production processes. Program Associate Scott Snyder provided excellent substantive assistance on particular chapters. Dawn Lawson's editorial skills improved the book enormously. Sung-Jae Oh diligently compiled the chronology and glossary. Special thanks are due to Assistant Director Sherrill M. Davis, who worked closely with the editor and chapter authors from the outset, bringing to this project her own commitment to public education and Korean studies.

K. A. Namkung
Executive Director
Education and Contemporary Affairs Division
The Asia Society
September 1990





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Introduction

Chong-Sik Lee

We are living in an era of momentous changes. Almost daily we hear about developments that were unthinkable a few years ago. The leaders of the world's seven major industrial nations, for example, met in Houston in July 1990 to discuss the ways and means of providing economic aid to the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union, in turn, agreed not to oppose membership of a united Germany in NATO. East and West Germany have just reunited completely. No one would have predicted these events even a year ago. There is no doubt now that, as far as Europe is concerned, the cold war has ended.

The changes on the Korean peninsula may not have been as dramatic, but many of the events that occurred between 1988 and 1990 can be characterized as historic in the context of Korea's sociopolitical development. The most obvious change was in South Korea's relations with what used to be called the "socialist camp." South Korea established diplomatic relations with all the East European nations (except Albania) in 1989 and early 1990; with the establishment of an official relationship with the Soviet Union in September 1990, South Korea's foreign relations entered a new era.

These developments, of course, affected North Korea, because the Soviet Union and the East European nations had been North Korea's staunch allies since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was established in 1948. North Korea sharply protested the East European and Soviet rapprochement with South Korea, but in vain. These countries wanted to pursue their own interests rather than follow the dictates of Pyongyang.

Significant changes occurred within South Korea as well. The dismantling of the military-imposed political system in 1987 and the inauguration of Roh Tae Woo as president of the Republic of Korea (ROK) in 1988 marked the beginning of a new era in South Korea's political history. Although one cannot dismiss the military's potential as a political force in South Korea, it no longer plays the dominant role it once did. While not all legal taboos and restrictions have been

lifted, the new political system allows the South Korean people the greatest degree of freedom ever in Korean history. Even though there were irregularities in the presidential elections in 1987 and the National Assembly elections the following year, there is no doubt that the voters exercised their rights. The National Assembly is no longer a rubber stamp, and the president can no longer act on his own as his predecessors did for nearly four decades. In short, South Korea underwent its own version of political *perestroika*. These are the subjects of chapters by Sung-Joo Han (politics) and Byung-Joon Ahn (international relations).

South Korea's relations with North Korea have been slow to change, but much has happened recently on this front as well. Chong-Sik Lee's chapter shows that North and South Korea held more meetings and exchanged more communication during 1989 than ever before. Not much happened during the first half of 1990, but in July the two sides agreed to hold a meeting of prime ministers in Seoul in September, to be followed by a similar meeting in Pyongyang in October. Although the Seoul meeting did not go beyond setting an agenda, it represented a major landmark in North-South relations, and there are high hopes that the meeting in Pyongyang will be productive.

The sudden removal of political restrictions greatly affected South Korea's society and economy, as the chapters by Vincent Brandt (society) and Bon-Ho Koo (economy) describe. The students, who had been vociferous even under the draconian regime of Chun Doo Hwan, demanded vast reforms. The workers, whose rights and interests had been restricted, if not suppressed, by the previous regimes, demanded their fair share. Demonstrations and strikes became the norm in South Korea in 1989. Interests and emotions clashed in the open. Manufacturers could not deliver the goods promised, and foreign buyers stayed away. Wages rose, and South Korea lost its competitive edge against other developing economies. Korean economists, however, predict that South Korea's economy will rebound in the latter half of 1990, with a 9.5 percent rise in GNP.

What transpired among workers and students, of course, could not help but inspire writers and artists. Publications of all sorts poured forth. Musicians, choreographers, dancers, dramatists, and other artists became a part of the People's Movement, which reinforced the movements of workers and students. Indeed, there was a renaissance in Korean culture. Freedom became the watchword of this new culture, a welcome change from the rigid and stifling regimen of the previous years. Excitement was in the air. In his chapter, Seung-Kon Kim

masterfully records and analyzes the diverse cultural movements in Korea today.

Michael Kalton's chapter, "Korean Modernity: Change and Continuity," attempts to assess all these developments in the context of Korea's history, philosophy, and culture. What role did Korea's Confucian tradition play in its modernization? How did modernization change Korean culture and values? These are some of the questions we asked Professor Kalton to address. Not only those interested in Korea but also students of China, Japan, and other Asian countries will find his analysis insightful and relevant.

The process of change in South Korea between 1988 and 1990 may have appeared to some observers as not only tumultuous but chaotic. Indeed, it was. But the chaos was as inevitable as it was essential for more orderly development in the future. I can say, from the vantage point of September 1990, that in these three years South Korea has virtually completed the period of readjustment and it will now move into a more mature and stable stage.

Note, for example, that the number of strikes declined by 77 percent in the first half of 1990 compared to the same period of the previous year.¹ The workers won a substantial raise in their wages and were promised an improvement in their working conditions. While student demonstrations continue to occur in Seoul and other cities, they no longer generate the kind of passion and enthusiasm they once did among the majority of the student population.

Politics, however, remains volatile as of the time of this writing in spite of President Roh's success in bringing the two opposition parties into a coalition with his party to form a new majority party. (See Sung-Joo Han's chapter for details.) The new Democratic Liberal Party is numerically strong, commanding a two-thirds majority in the National Assembly, but it will take considerable effort on the part of Roh and his colleagues to translate this numerical strength into genuine public support.

¹ *Choson Ilbo*, June 22, 1990.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my deep-felt thanks to each of the authors for their valuable contribution in portraying the dynamic process of change that has been occurring in Korea. The staff at The Asia Society, Sherrill M. Davis, Deborah Field Washburn, and Andrea Sokerka in particular, also deserve more than a perfunctory expression of gratitude. Although the convention does not allow their names to appear on the title page, they should be listed as coeditors of this volume. Special mention should also be made of the contribution made by Scott Snyder, who has added much to the chapters on politics and economy. I am sure the authors will agree that this is truly a joint product of all of us.

Note: Throughout the volume the terms “Korea” and “Korean” refer to South Korea unless North Korea is explicitly included or the time period is before 1948. As to matters of style, we have not followed any strict system of romanization for Korean names but have tried to use the spelling most frequently encountered in English-language publications. Names of persons in the text of chapters are rendered as three separate elements, with the surname first.

1

The Experiment in Democracy

Sung-Joo Han

The Political Background

Korea, along with the Philippines, was at the forefront of a democratic revolution in 1987 that has since swept through Eastern Europe and Central and South America, toppling authoritarian governments and redefining the nature and balance of international relations. As the world began to focus on the 1988 Seoul Olympics scheduled for the following year, businesspeople, workers, and housewives joined student radicals in the streets to demand free elections and an end to the authoritarian government led by former general Chun Doo Hwan. After weeks of escalating tension and confrontation in the streets between fire-bomb-wielding protestors and helmet-clad riot police armed with tear gas, the government yielded to the people's demands.

Roh Tae Woo, a former classmate of General Chun's who had been anointed in April as new leader of the Democratic Justice Party (DJP) and successor to the Korean presidency, declared at the height of the confrontation on June 29, 1987, that the next Korean president would be chosen by the people through free elections under a new democratic constitution, thus launching the Korean experiment with democracy.

This pathbreaking venture truly was an experiment. The only previous democratic revolution, led by student protesters who toppled South Korea's first leader, Syngman Rhee, in April of 1960, had lasted only a year. The popularly elected successors to Rhee, Prime Minister Chang Myon and President Yun Po Sun, were ousted in a military coup d'état led by General Park Chung Hee. Park imposed a strict authoritarian regime and ruled until he was assassinated by the director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, Kim Chae Kyu, in 1979. After months of political turmoil, General Chun took power the fol-

This chapter has benefited from the constructive suggestions of Scott Snyder.

lowing year and bloodily suppressed a popular uprising at the provincial city of Kwangju to consolidate his control.

In addition to the precedent of authoritarian rule, Korean culture and tradition are rooted in Confucianism, an ethic that in Korean society emphasizes community hierarchies and social order over individual freedom of expression and self-determination, the central tenets of democratic societies. Roh Tae Woo's June 1987 Declaration was the first step in discovering if democratic reforms were indeed adaptable to Korea, and if so, what kind of democracy Korea would be.

Having ratified a new, democratic constitution in October 1987, the people went back to the polls in December for the first election of a president by direct popular vote in 26 years. Over 90 percent of the people participated in the presidential election, which was won by DJP candidate Roh Tae Woo with a plurality of less than 37 percent of the votes cast. Roh won because the vote for the two long-time opposition leaders, Kim Dae Jung of the Party for Peace and Democracy (PPD) and Kim Young Sam of the Reunification Democratic Party (RDP), was split almost evenly. Kim Jong Pil of the New Democratic-Republican Party (NDRP), a fourth candidate whose party comprised former leaders in the Park Chung Hee government, did much better than expected, capturing 8 percent of the vote. A divided opposition had only itself to blame; the two Kims who led the opposition together received a majority (55 percent) of the votes, yet the DJP, with only a plurality, retained its hold on power.

By early 1988, with Roh Tae Woo's assumption of the presidency, it appeared that South Korean politics might become more subdued after several years of volatile confrontation. A peaceful transition of power had been accomplished, albeit within the same party, through popular democratic elections. With the opposition leadership of the two Kims—Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam—discredited among the electorate for their failure to suppress personal political ambitions and form a united front against Roh, the dominance of the DJP in South Korean politics seemed assured, at least for the foreseeable future.

But the voters handed the DJP an unexpected and serious setback in the April 1988 parliamentary elections. The party failed to secure a majority, winning only 125 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly. Kim Dae Jung's PPD won 71 seats and became the largest opposition party. With Kim Young Sam's RDP and Kim Jong Pil's NDRP securing 59 and 35 seats respectively, the three parties in opposition to the ruling DJP held a substantial majority of the parliamentary seats. The unexpected election results not only resurrected the political lives of Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam but also presented the third Kim, Kim Jong Pil of the NDRP, with disproportionate political influence