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The Korean State and Candlelight Democracy: Paradigms and Evolution

Robert Bedeski ¹

The Korean state evolved as a distinct entity in a region of major power convergence and conflict. All states, as human constructions, seek sovereignty and life security of their subjects/citizens, and are rooted in organic society. In the Republic of Korea, constitutional order has provided a framework for political action and a succession of regimes – authoritarianism, military dictatorship, and constitutional democracy. Since 1960 two paradigms have undergone a cycle of growth and decline, and a third, since the 2016 candlelight demonstrations in Gwanghwamun, may be the beginning of a third generation paradigm – populist constitutionalism.

Keywords: Korea, state, paradigms, society, life security, constitution, candlelight democracy

The Setting

The Republic of Korea will soon celebrate 60 years of existence. That it has survived war and implacable hostility from Communist neighbors is testament to a fierce desire to maintain independence. A further accomplishment is how democratic spirit has struggled to purge government of abuse and corruption, and forge responsive and accountable institutions. The economic "Miracle on the Han" may overshadow the political "Miracle", but the progress of democracy stands in sharp contrast to the totalitarian dynasty in the DPRK. Both style themselves as "republics" but meanings are vastly different. In the north, government (controlled by the Communist Party and Army) claim to act in the name and interests of the Korean people, as interpreted by an elite. The southern ROK has evolved in a liberal direction, often imperfectly in fits and starts, but resulting in a polity having far greater prosperity and liberty than its northern counterpart.²

The Korean war (1950-1953) militarized both sides of the 38th parallel, and only in 1987 did stable civilian government emerge. In the subsequent three decades, prosperity increased and a routine of popular elections seemed to deliver benefits of constitutional government. Scandals involving politicians, businessmen and bureaucrats continued as background noise, and erupted into mass demonstrations in 2016. The catalyst was revelations of corruption in

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² Freedom House assesses South Korea as "partly free". <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2017/south-korea>

the Blue House and the Sewol ferry disaster (April 16, 2014), which killed 304 people. An estimated million protesters marched in Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square (November 12, 2016). On December 9, the National Assembly passed a motion of impeachment against President Park Geun-hye. Three months later (March 10, 2017), the Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment motion in a unanimous vote. A new election was held (May 9) and Moon Jae-In replaced Acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn as chief executive.

The so-called "candlelight democracy" has strong elements of populist empowerment – the explosion of "people power" to restore government to its proper place and function. It has been characterized as an expression of direct democracy, and exhibited elements of a new populism. The origin of "republic" means "affair, or thing of people (in general)". The 2016 demonstrations were a popular movement to take back the state which was becoming a non-accountable oligarchy who were perceived to run government as an exclusive preserve - the opposite of a republic.

What saved the Korean republic from devolving into a bureaucratic oligarchy or a new authoritarianism? Social media played a significant role in mobilizing urban middle-class citizens, and there has been a tradition of students as the political conscience of the country, awakening parents and workers to abuses at the top. The convergence of Blue House corruption and the Sewol tragedy, along with legislative proceedings for impeachment, offered both target and solution.

Significance of events during the past year needs to be considered in their long-term influence on the Korean state. Populist movements often seem to ignite major change, but lack sustaining power unless a rival elite is carried to power by that movement. President Moon won office with a plurality of votes, and represents a more "progressive" approach than his predecessors. He carries popular hope that more honest and responsive government will emerge. However, his first year in office has been overshadowed by North Korea flexing nuclear muscle in bomb testing and missile launching.

Context and content of the South Korean state have determined the character and direction of politics, with popular sentiment exercising corrective pressure. Context refers to continued threat and promise from North Korea, as well as flourishing trade with chief sponsor China. Its threat consists of a thoroughly militarized society, with echoes of ancient Sparta. The regime is highly personalized by the Kim dynasty, sacrificing well-being of subjects³ to military ambitions. Another part of South Korean context is its geo-strategic location in Northeast Asia among three major powers and protection by a fourth. Extrapolating from twentieth century and recent history suggests that the twenty-first will not be a peaceable era. Past penetration by North Korean agents renders open society unrealizable without reunification and neutralization of the peninsula.

State content refers to its structure, which has been set largely by the constitution, whose first principle is sovereignty. Sovereignty defines who will control disputed territory and populations. It is constantly tested in border disputes, jurisdiction over citizens and resources, treaties, and efficacy of law. Although a government may arbitrarily declare absolute control

³ "Citizen" is a term best used when members of a polity have a voice in government direction.

over a section of territory, acceptance is frequently incomplete or resisted. Neither the ROK nor DPRK accepts the other's claim of sovereignty over Korea, and the war of reunification was never ended – only stalemated in armistice. Article 3 of the 1987 ROK constitution reads: "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands."¹ The first constitution of the ROK refers to "state" (국가) 72 times (DPRK 42 times). "Government" (정부) is a distinct category, mentioned 24 times, and refers to the institutional machinery that administers the state. In both states establishment of a sovereign entity over the other sets up contradictory markers.²

On evolution of the state

Sovereignty, as central essence of the state, began in the tribal days of early Korea, was nurtured in various kingdoms, and periodically challenged by the Chinese empire and various nomadic tribes.³ Silla and Koguryŏ unified the peninsula, and the Mongols nearly eradicated the Korean state. The Chosŏn dynasty restored Korean sovereignty until the Japanese imperium seized control. Post-war Korea was divided into the two halves of today. US-Soviet rivalry led to establishment of two Korean states, which have evolved into mutually exclusive systems. One is democratic-capitalist and global economic actor, linked by security treaty to the US and vital to defense of Japan. The other has become a nuclear power at the expense of a repressed and impoverished population governed by a fiercely loyal elite under the Kim dynasty.⁴ Pursuit of absolute sovereignty in the DPRK has led to emphasis on military defense from missiles, nuclear weapons and a hugely expensive arsenal for a military establishment that has displaced the party as decider of state direction.

The second principle of the ROK constitution is the welfare and protection of its citizens, under sovereign government. Sovereign states are created for the security of human life. Two premises are excluded from this approach. First, existing states are not divine interventions in human affairs. There is no historical or world spirit guiding or controlling human destiny despite what Christian⁵ or Islamic fundamentalists⁶ may claim. Second, states are not the "natural" outcome of human evolution nor inevitable stages of history as some Marxists might believe. Despite Aristotle's dictum that man is a "social animal", it is more accurate to say that man is a rational animal who modifies his behavior in order to maximize longevity, and supports social actions to fulfill that purpose. States and civil societies are later products of human rationality.

The sovereign state is the transcendent entity within which individual lives are maintained. It is an all-embracing structure, with government providing machinery for carrying out state functions through law-making, administration, protection and enforcement. The objects of state protection and government actions are the citizens of the state, 국민. The American state was established with the Declaration of Independence and government with the constitution. A fundamental principle was that "All men are created equal". A second, derived from the first, was all men had the right to pursue "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". Such statements empowered government to be the supreme agency to protect citizens and are echoed in ROK governmental principles. The South Korean constitution was both declaration of state sovereignty and government design, but carried no presumption of universal applicability. It was intended for use by and for Koreans only – a political contract

between state and citizens that remains in force today. Its principles are derived from Western liberal thought, but in practice a heavy-handed statism postponed actual democracy for nearly four decades.

The concept of "paradigm" is useful in examining evolution of Korea's democratic state. It encompasses a framework of analysis linking diverse phenomena into a cohesive pattern. A paradigm should also identify central principles which give it coherence.⁷ We can summarize developments of the modern Korean state as follows:

1. Since 1948, the South Korean state has undergone four regime phases:
 - a. Civilian authoritarianism – First Republic (1948-1960)
 - b. (Brief) Parliamentary democracy – Second Republic (1960)
 - c. Military authoritarianism – Third, Fourth and Fifth Republics (1960-1987)
 - d. Civilian constitutionalism – Sixth Republic (1987-2017)⁸
2. Each phase capitalized on the accomplishments of its predecessor, and was legitimated on rejection of previous excesses and failures. In this sense, regime succession was a process of conservative, not radical, revolution.
3. Events around recent "Candlelight Democracy"⁹ may introduce a fifth regime, which I tentatively call "populist constitutionalism." While the populist engagement and emotional momentum of the past year cannot be sustained at a high level, various leaders and organizers will likely continue to apply pressure on established political parties to be more responsive to demands for good government and concern for the welfare of ordinary citizens.

Practically all modern politics occurs in the context of the sovereign nation-state and its offspring – civil society. If the state is a human construction, who are its builders and who are its beneficiaries? Syngman Rhee, Park Chung Hee, Roh Tae-woo, and Kim Il-sŏng made significant contributions to state formation during their tenure. Political structures do not build themselves. Creation or maintenance of a state stimulates and encourages men and women eager to influence and control others, producing rivalries, competition, conflict and alliances. Self-selection of political actors to engage in affairs of state favors those with opportunity and a strong Will-to-Power.

Candlelight democracy

In the present Korean context, a new elite has been energized by the removal of President Park, accompanied by popular mobilization. Democracy recruits masses of citizens into new modes of action and thinking, sometimes displacing traditional affinities and transforming passive individuals into organizational participants. The stimulus of popular issues often triggers individual participation and immersion, occasionally catapulting a few into

organization leadership. Candlelight democracy can be viewed as a mix of righteous indignation and demand for reform by an urban mass, and a set of events analogous to the demonstrations which ushered in the Sixth Republic. But an objective view also suggests that its goals and achievements will be intimately affected by the character of its organizers and their political interaction. A minority of a movement's membership will emerge as leaders and possibly change direction of the state.

The Korean Republic has a record of several regime changes, oscillating between autocratic order (First, Third through Fifth Republics) and democratic institutions (Second and Sixth Republics). In the absence of reunification, the present state is the broadest organization bringing sovereignty and life security to the Korean people. The state's military establishment is vital to maintaining sovereignty. Political corruption demands efficient investigation and prosecution from police and courts. Environmental protection needs coordinated efforts and resources which only governments can bring. International trade and domestic production depend upon a degree of government support. In other words, a strong state is indispensable to survival of a regime and its governed population. At the same time, one only need look northward to understand the end-point of an all-powerful state – one which completely dominates all aspects of life, and where liberty has little substance.

The Gwanghwamun protestors were calling for a state purified of private greed, and more attuned to the public good in order to enhance life security.¹⁰ The outcome of various scandals, corporate crimes, brittle relations with China and North Korean threats challenge the fundamental desire for human liberty – which requires limiting the power of the state over its citizens. The irony of candlelight democracy is that one result could be a more empowered yet populist-limited, state. President Park was criticized and removed not because of over-reaching power, but because she betrayed the office and served private instead of public interests. Anger over the Sewol incident was fueled by government failure to oversee safety and mount timely rescue of the ill-fated passengers and crew. Mass fury was directed at a state deficit of power and the executive branch's failure to maintain integrity and carry out its functions – not its excess. Corruption and incompetence aroused demands for more power to the state, not less. The demonstrations were no mass uprising but rather a collective expression that the legislative and judicial branches of government carry out their lawful duties of checking the power of the executive – effectively reinforcing the American constitutional template which had been largely adopted in 1948.

In democratic states every adult age cohort has an opportunity to influence the shape of politics. Korean students have been most vociferous as critics and as catalysts for change. As aspiring leaders and share-holders in the nation, they have confronted governments committed to stability and continuity. Sharing the peninsula with a regime that tried to unify through war, Seoul once reacted with deadly force against protestors accused of weakening the national will (Gwangju 1980).¹¹ Contrary visions of the national polity clashed with deadly consequences. While these confrontations grab the attention of media and participants, they take place in a much broader historical context – one in which state form has evolved and taken shape.

Most demonstrators desire justice by removal of rulers they believe to have perverted or ignored the constitution as law of the land. Some amendments to the constitution might improve the state, but there seemed little desire to abandon the Republic and install a new and

revolutionary order. If I read those events accurately, the candle-holding protestors wanted correction and reform— a return to competence, accountability and transparency of government.

The current administration is the product of a conservative constitution-affirming restoration, and previous parameters of the state have been preserved. However, the prominence of social media in mobilizing demonstrators indicates a new political instrument of communication which threatens to bypass old-guard political parties if they do not adapt. Single-issue (impeachment) mass pressure proved to be extraordinarily effective, but will be difficult to institutionalize or duplicate. Nonetheless, a new dimension of mass politics has emerged – one in which multiple interests were harmonized and brought to bear against a national problem. Emotions were harnessed to focus attention on a specific set of grievances for constitutional resolution. Non-violence was central in the success to bring in groups generally apolitical.

Bertrand Russell observed that “History makes one aware that there is no finality in human affairs; there is not a static perfection and an unimprovable wisdom to be achieved.”¹² To historians, 2016 will be a significant marker of change and continuity. Mass unified and coordinated action demanding honest and responsible government differs from many past demonstrations, and halted a drift to cronyism and corruption. Corruption at the top is a sign of state failure, and if allowed to spread unchecked, could weaken the credibility of domestic sovereignty. A damaged polity is a weakened polity, and South Korea can ill afford to project major disunity in a region where major powers have historically invaded and occupied an enfeebled nation. Few Koreans are unaware of their precarious political and economic position. Peace will not be achieved until reunification is accomplished, and even then, international rivalries of neighbors will continue to affect the state.

Evolution of the Korean State

The Korean state has been a long-running example of political and economic evolution through adaptation. Sovereignty as self-government has historically varied from near-total territorial integrity under a single government to zero under conquest or colonial regimes. Currently, two semi-sovereign nation-states rule the peninsula, and both have experimented with various forms of government since liberation and division in 1945. Such regime revisions are not new, and I have roughly identified these state-forms as paradigms (Table 1), noting their time-length, characteristic template, and hinge event of termination. This abbreviated summary of Korean state history provides a broad context in which to locate existential dynamics. The quest for sovereignty and improvement of life security have produced a sequence of regimes defined by a unique organizing principle and termination/re-alignment.

Table 1. Thirteen paradigms of the Korean state Pre-war and post-war

Paradigm#	Regime	Period	Characteristics	Termination or re-alignment
1	Three Kingdoms	57 BC - 668 AD	Co-existence	Rebellion, conspiracy, coup, wars
2	Koryō	918-1392	Tang China template	Mongol conquest (1259); military coup
3	Chosŏn	1392-1910	Ming China template	Japanese conquest & absorption
4	Japan colony	1910-1945	European template	US-Soviet Union occupation
5	North Korea	1945-1950	Soviet template	Korean War
6	North Korea	1953-1979	Maoist China template	Deng reforms
7	North Korea	1979-present	Military template	In progress
8	South Korea (First Republic)	1945-1960	Civilian authoritarianism	Popular demonstrations
9	South Korea (Second Republic)	1960-61	Parliamentary democracy	Military coup
10	South Korea (Third, Fourth, Fifth Republic)	1961-1986	Military constitutionalism	Popular demonstrations
11	South Korea (Sixth Republic)	1987-2016	Constitutional democracy	(Park impeachment) <i>Affirmation, not termination of constitutional principles</i>
12	South Korea	2017-???	Populist constitutionalism	Economic failure? War? Corruption? Excessive demands & expectations?
13	United Korea	???	Confederation? Reunification?	<i>Future unknown</i>

Each state paradigm exhibits unique dynamics and existed as adaptation to opportunities and circumstances. This preliminary sketch suggests that:

1. No paradigm since 1945 lasts more than a generation (25-30 years).
2. The head of state, as culmination of political power, has major influence on delegating responsibility, assigning reward and punishment, and setting the tone of administration.
3. Over the course of modern South Korea, there emerged a sequential pattern of determination, consolidation, maturity, inertia, corruption and semi-organized opposition.
4. Only paradigms 4 and 5 were imposed from outside – Japanese colonialism and to a lesser extent, the pre-Korean War DPRK, which followed supervision of Soviet military overlords.
5. The present questions for Korea are:
 - a. whether the phenomenon of candlelight democracy and election of President Moon represents a new paradigm – which we can term either "constitutional populism" or "direct democracy;"
 - b. whether US-North Korea relations will lead to war;
 - c. whether a paradigm of populist constitutionalism will strengthen the administrative state with increased regulation, taxation and intervention in the economy and society;
 - d. whether an enlarged regulatory apparatus will emerge to hold social, economic, administrative and political institutions more accountable; and
 - e. whether these will prove counter-productive and stifle past dynamism of the Republic.

Table 2 illustrates political dynamics of the Sixth Republic summarized in five stages of a paradigmatic cycle. Korean democracy defines presidential elections as key hinge events defining paradigm stages, although they are resulting convergence of various social forces, including a rising contingent of ambitious youth, breakdown of government credibility, and power-holders' shift from public virtue to private interests.

Table 2. Stages of Sixth Republic’s constitutional democracy – 30 year cycle

Stage	Sixth Republic	Characteristics	External variables
1	1988 -Roh Tae-woo election	Mandate for major change	Softening USSR; hosting 1988 Olympics as adaptation to global democratic trends
2	1993-Kim Young-sam election	Validation of state direction	Apparent global reordering towards democracy
3	1998 Kim Dae-jung election	Reinforcement of democratic change	Further democratization
4	2003 Roh Moo-hyun (impeachment attempt) 2013 Park Geun-hye election	Signs of corruption, resulting in partial disenchantment, alienation	Shocks of international terrorism; increased nationalism in China and Russia
5	2017 Moon Jae-in election	Confirmation of previous constitutional paradigm; while injecting populist pressure = new paradigm?	Rise of economic nationalism (US), social media and populism

The military dictatorship under Park Chung Hee and his successors can also be interpreted as a paradigm which underwent a similar five-stage evolution. The Sixth Republic was inaugurated and maintained with promise to enforce democratic rule of law and accountability of officials, while the preceding quarter century of rule by generals brought harsh order, strong national defense, and rapid economic development at the cost of democratic and accountable government. The Second Republic’s short-lived parliamentary democracy under Chang Myon, was inadequate to the challenges of the age. The limited reforms under Park suppressed demands for greater democracy in favor of civic order and economic growth. By the 1980s opposition had grown, with the new middle class joining students and workers, against often brutal repression by the army and its corporate allies. Table 3 summarizes stages in the Park-initiated paradigm.

Table 3. Stages of authoritarian democracy – 25 year cycle

Stage	Third –Fifth Republics	Characteristics
1	1963 – Park Chung Hee elected President	Mandate for major change – Restoration of order, defense against North Korea
2	1967 – Park re-elected	Validation of state direction – Five year economic plan
3	1972 – Yushin constitution	Intensification of authoritarian regime
4	1978 – Opposition wins more votes; popular demonstrations; assassination of Park	Signs of corruption, resulting in partial disenchantment, alienation
5	1985-87 - Resistance, then democratization	Rejection of previous paradigm; new paradigm

The objective of sovereignty is independence from other states, and creation of a political and legal order appropriate to the territorially and culturally defined population. The reinforcing essence of a nation’s sovereignty is a combination of a people’s history, their norms, and borrowing from other nations in the form of paradigm templates. The Park paradigm shared numerous attributes with other anti-Communist military dictatorships, and seemed an effective

defense against infiltration from the North. In addition, it provided an authoritarian umbrella for rapid economic growth, and conformed to the US patron's anti-communism. The next paradigm under the Sixth Republic enabled a popularity contest of Presidential elections, enforcement of law under constitutionally designated courts, and significant latitude for political parties. Perhaps the greatest benefit of the Sixth Republic paradigm has been to cultivate a robust civil society, replacing intimidated subjects with empowered citizens.

Conclusion

The Korean word for crisis (위기), comes from the Chinese *wei-ji* (危機)- composed of characters meaning "danger " and "opportunity". The convergence of North Korean belligerence (met by US military resistance) and a year of popular opposition to politics as usual, is both danger and opportunity for the Moon government. His choice seems to be between a government more accountable to the electorate, and one more militarized to defend hard-won sovereignty from North Korea, China, and other major powers.

The precarious existence of the sovereign Republic of Korea has concentrated the minds of citizens on how best to reconcile state sovereignty and life security. The northern alternative of a cultist polity repels those who value liberty, but may exercise a certain admiration for the equality and solidarity extolled in that system. The character and quality of any state is a construction of human agency. The operation of free will to make rational choices about life security requires an open society, which is synonymous with "civil society", and which transforms state subjects into citizens. A minority is motivated by Will-to-Power to form and direct the state. Democratic systems elect their rulers under stipulated laws, while dictatorships seize the ruling heights by stealth and raw force. Candlelight democracy has validated the constitutional order established six decades ago and revised several times in the interim. Whether the current government can harness those sentiments to pursue further reform and stronger defense of national sovereignty will determine Korea's fortunes.

¹ The DPRK constitution does not have a corresponding territorial definition, but refers to reunification as future achievement.

² “For decades, each state pretended to be the only one legitimately representing the whole people across the divided peninsula and along antagonistic ideological lines. From this perspective, the North and South Korean Constitutions appear to be the product of an extreme case of disagreement on peoplehood, one in which two actors’ conflict over popular representation is compounded with a conflict over political orthodoxy and territorial sovereignty.” J. Guichard, “In the Name of the People: Disagreeing over Peoplehood in the North and South Korean Constitutions.” *Asian Journal of Law and Society*, 4 (2017), pp. 405–445, 407.

³ Jinwung Kim, *A History of Korea: From "Land of the Morning Calm" to States in Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012).

⁴ Formation of the DPRK and Soviet involvement are described and documented in Dae-Sook Suh, *Kim Il Sung: The North Korean Leader* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), and Robert Scalapino and Chong-sik Lee, *Communism in Korea*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).

⁵ Biblical references include "The Most High rules in the kingdom of men and gives it to whomsoever he will, and sets up over it the lowest of men." (Daniel 4:14)
https://www.biblegateway.com/quicksearch/?quicksearch=subjection&qv_version=GNV.

⁶ Quran (4:59) - "O you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Messenger and those in authority from among you..."
<https://thereligionofpeace.com/pages/quran/loyalty-to-non-muslim-government.aspx> .

⁷ George Modelski and Kazimeirz Poznanski, "Evolutionary Paradigms in the Social Sciences". *International Studies Quarterly* (1996) 40, 315-319.

⁸ Robert Bedeski, *The Transformation of South Korea: Reform and Reconstitution in the Sixth Republic under Roh Tae Woo, 1987-1992*. (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁹ "How to Remove a President: Mass Protests Force Out South Korean Leader Amid Corruption Scandal",
https://www.democracynow.org/2017/3/13/how_to_remove_a_president_mass.

¹⁰ "South Korea’s candlelight protests a peaceful force", <http://www.atimes.com/article/south-koreas-candlelight-protests-peaceful-force/> .

¹¹ "...an assassin's bullet, combined with mass unrest in Kwangju and elsewhere, caused the temporary collapse of the southern system. Most of what held the system together was at the top: the central state in Seoul, its executive, and its claim of legitimacy." Bruce Cumings, *Korea's Place in the Sun*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1997), 205.

¹² B. Russell, *Portraits from memory, and other essays*. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1956) p. 182.