

POLITICS AND PROTEST IN SOUTH KOREA

COLONIAL PERIOD (1910-1945)

While Korea was formally annexed by the Japanese Empire in 1910, it had become a protectorate in 1905 and was under Japanese influence since the end of the First Sino-Japanese War in 1895. The annexation foreclosed the possibility that Korea would modernize on its own terms. The colonial period is generally described as having three periods, military rule (1910-1919), cultural rule (1920-1931), and mobilization for war (1931-1945). There is both resistance and collaboration with the Japanese authorities. Leftwing thought is particularly critical of the colonial situation, lending it authority as a liberatory politics.

ANNEXATION (1910)

Japan annexes Korea after a wave of anti-Japanese sentiment (including political assassinations) endangers the protectorate. The initial period of “military rule” is referred to by Koreans as the “dark times”; according to Taylor Atkins, the Japanese authorities “enjoyed an autonomy of action in Korea that was the envy of colonial administrators elsewhere” (26).

MARCH 1 MOVEMENT (1919)

Korea pleads for independence at the Versailles peace talks in vain. (Versailles favored the colonial claims of WWI victors). A huge protest movement breaks out in Korea, dismaying Japanese authorities who cracked down violently. A period of “cultural rule” follows in response to the unrest, perpetuating colonial rule with an ostensibly milder policy aimed at appeasing Korean dissent.

JAPAN INVADES MANCHURIA (1931)

With a foothold on the Asian mainland, Japan begins aggressively taking over China’s northeast. Koreans living and working in Manchuria are embroiled in the colonial project. The future leader of North Korea, Kim Il Sung famously joins the Chinese Communist Party and begins guerilla activities against the Japanese.

LIBERATION, OCCUPATION, DPRK (1945-1950)

With Japan’s defeat in WWII, Korea is liberated. The country’s north is occupied by the Soviet Union and the south, by the United States. Initial joy at liberation is complicated when competing visions for the country’s future cause increasingly dramatic rifts between the left and right. The nation is of course caught in the Cold War binary of the US and the USSR.

OCCUPATION (1945-1948)

Both the US and the USSR occupy Korea, in the south and north respectively, both aiming to create a Korean state that aligns with their foreign policy interests.

DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF NORTH KOREA (DPRK)/REPUBLIC OF SOUTH KOREA (ROK) (1948)

Both north and south establish a Korean state, the ROK is founded on August 15th in the south and the DPRK on September 9th in the north. The capitals are Seoul and Pyongyang, respectively, and the 38th parallel serves as an approximate line of division.

KOREAN WAR (1950-1953)

Both North and South Korea claim that the other party provoked the conflict with border fighting, but the full-blown war begins with North Korea’s invasion of the south on June 25, 1950. South Korea, the US, and allied nations fight North Korean and Chinese troops supported by the Soviet Union. Sources indicated that up to 4 million people died in the civil conflict, most of them civilians. Both Koreas were economically devastated by the conflict, which caused extreme anti-American sentiment in the North, whose cities were almost completely destroyed by American bombings. In the South, meanwhile, anti-communism was rampant and stoked by the conservative government.

NORTH KOREA INVADES (1950)

The war begins with the North Korean invasion on June 25, with North Korean troops almost completely occupying the south. By October of that year, South Korea, the US, and its allies pushed the North Koreans back to the country’s northern border with China, whose forces soon join the fray.

ARMISTICE (1953)

The armistice signed on July 27, 1953, halted hostilities and maintained a division between the two Koreas at the 38th parallel. There is, to this day, no formal peace treaty between the two nations.

THE DEVELOPMENTAL STATE (1953- LATE 1980s)

South Korea in the postwar was extremely poor, the north actually recovered economically more quickly and South Korea didn’t overtake North Korea in per capita GDP till the mid-1970s (Lie 78, citing a 1978 CIA factbook). The dictator Park Chung Hee championed a “developmental state” in the 60s and 70s; that is, policies oriented towards the fast development of a poor nation. Sociologist John Lie contends that Park’s policies had little to do with the country’s enormous wealth gains: normalization of relations with Japan and South Korea’s role in supporting the Vietnam War effort, however, were key in the development of light industry and integrated South Korea with the Japanese and US economies (Lie 43-44). South Korea’s triumphant 1988 Olympics was a capstone of its tremendous economic growth in the previous decades.

APRIL 19 STUDENT UPRISING (1960)

A local student uprising initially, the April 19 Protests spread through the country and forced out the corrupt regime of Syngman Rhee. Hopes for a democratic South Korea, however, were dashed in 1961 by a military coup.

PARK CHUNG-HEE COUP (1961)

General Park leads a coup, prematurely ending South Korea’s democratic revolution. His economic programs are remembered by many South Koreans as miracle plans that helped the nation emerge from postwar poverty, though as mentioned above, geopolitical circumstances had a lot to do with the country’s economic growth.

NORMALIZATION TREATY WITH JAPAN (1965)

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“NEW KOREA” (1987-NOW)

In the film, Hinzpeter tells Kim that he hopes to meet him in the “New Korea.” He means, of course, a democratic South Korea. South Korea’s peaceful transition to democracy began in 1987, when massive protests of Chun Doo-hwan, who was aiming to extend his presidency beyond the legal limit, ousted him from power. The waning of the Cold War meant that American anti-communism could no longer be relied on to bolster the nation’s dictatorial regimes. A democratic election was held, and another member of his party legally won power. By 1993, an opposition lawmaker was elected president and by the middle of the decade, justice for Gwangju was sought in South Korea’s highest courts. Specters of Park Chung Hee, however, would come to haunt South Korea again when his daughter, Park Geun-hye was elected president in 2013 and then impeached and jailed in 2017.

JEON TAE-IL SELF-IMMOLATION (1970)

Workers’ rights activist and worker Jeon Tae-il sets himself on fire in Seoul to protest the horrible working conditions faced by the working class that fueled South Korea’s economic miracle. His death was a political catalyst for labor unionizing and galvanized pro-labor and anti-Park feelings among students and intellectuals.

YUSHIN CONSTITUTION PROMOGULATED (1972)

A local student uprising initially, the April 19 Protests spread through the country and forced out the corrupt regime of Syngman Rhee. Hopes for a democratic South Korea, however, were dashed in 1961 by a military coup.

PARK CHUNG-HEE ASSASSINATION (1979)

Park is assassinated by his own security chief in October, though it’s not clear whether this was part of a larger planned coup.

CHUN DOO-HWAN COUP (1979)

A local student uprising initially, the April 19 Protests spread through the country and forced out the corrupt regime of Syngman Rhee. Hopes for a democratic South Korea, however, were dashed in 1961 by a military coup.

GWANGJU (1980)

A second coup by Chun Doo-hwan solidifies his leadership. He arrests opposition leaders, closes universities, and declares martial law on May 17th to suppress political dissent. Gwangju protests against his undemocratic seizure of power break out one day later. More details of the uprising and aftermath are included in the narrative above.

JUNE DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE (1987)

South Koreans take to the streets when Chun announces that he will serve a second term instead of allowing for a democratic transition. The situation was so heated that Chun stepped down and his successor Roh Tae-woo was elected when opposition candidates split the vote.

SEOUL OLYMPICS (1988)

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OPPOSITION PRESIDENT (1993)

Kim Young-sam, South Korea’s first opposition party president and first civilian president in over 30 years, begins his tenure. He oversees the arrests and prosecution of Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo.

CHUN DOO HWAN (1995)

Chun Doo-hwan is indicted for his coup and his role in the Gwangju Uprising. He is sentenced first to death, then life in prison. Ultimately, his sentence is commuted to the outrage of many South Koreans.

IMF CRISIS (1997)

This financial crisis shocks East Asia and plunges South Korea into a dramatic economic downturn. Many commit suicide and others are left with traumatic memories of the IMF crisis. The 1999 film Peppermint Candy famously combines the traumas of Gwangju with those of the IMF crisis; its main character is racked with guilt over his participation in putting down Gwangju as a soldier and crushed by financial ruin.

SEWOL & PROTESTS (2014)

A ferry carrying travelers to Jeju Island sinks, killing 306 of 476 passengers, 250 of them high school students. Subsequent investigation shows that the boat was overloaded and that cargo was not secured—a sharp turn is thought to have caused the boat to capsize as weight shifted in the cargo hold. The disaster has profound political implications, with outcries against poor regulations and badly executed rescue efforts ultimately leading to high levels of dissatisfaction with the president, Park Geun-hye. Protests against the government’s handling of the disaster on the one-year anniversary of the sinking are broken up by police, leading to even greater public anger.

PARK GEUN-HYE IMPEACHED (2016)

On rocky ground since the Sewol disaster, Park is embroiled in scandal in 2016 when it is revealed that Choi Soon-sil, a woman with no position in the government, had access to classified materials, impacted Park’s policies, and used her close relationship with the president for financial gain. In 2016, the largest protests that South Korea had seen since the 1980s break out around the nation in reaction to Park’s actions. Park is impeached in late 2016 and sentenced to 24 years in prison in 2018.