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What Has Happened to the Poster Child: Is South Korean Democracy Backsliding?

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Abstract: South Korean democracy had been under attack. This was most apparent in President Yoon Suk-Yeol's attempt to impose martial law. But it was not the only challenge to Korean democracy, previously regarded as one of the most successful third-wave democracies. Though not calling into question episodes of democratic regression, this article challenges arguments of Korean democracy backsliding and instead points to the country's democratic rollercoaster: ascent under progressive leadership followed by sharp decline under right-wing administrations. Democratic resilience is also evidenced in civil society mobilisation and popular uprisings in democratic crises, and the rise of programmatic party competition has been vital in democratic consolidation. Significant achievements notwithstanding, a profound crisis of Korean democratic politics is acknowledged. The article proposes an institutionalist account of democratic stagnation that puts constitutional flaws of the Korean political system and the chaebol-dominated economy centre-stage. This institutionalist perspective informs the argument that fundamental constitutional reform recalibrating the relationship between the executive and legislature is imperative, and this with the priority objective of strengthening the party-political system. This research contends that it is the Korean constitutional architecture that has been compromising the mediating capacity of political parties and, doing so, holding back democratic progress.

Key words: Civil Society, Democratic Backsliding, Imperial President, Martial Law, Political Parties, South Korea

President Yoon Suk-Yeol proclaimed martial law in an unannounced late-night television address on December 3, 2024. The military was mobilised, and all political activities were prohibited. He ordered the arrest of opposition politicians and the chairman of his own party, who had become increasingly critical of the president. Reminiscent of Trumpian conspiracy theories, Yoon Suk-Yeol alleged election fraud in the National Assembly election earlier in the year and thus sent the military to break into the buildings of the National Electoral Commission (NEC) to secure evidence, besides the detention of NEC officials. A popular uprising within minutes of the televised proclamation, however, sabotaged attempts by the military to block opposition MPs from entering the parliament building. To prevent the nullification of the martial law decree, the president personally instructed a special warfare commander to "break open the door, and drag the lawmakers out" (cited

in Korea Herald, December 10, 2024). Opposition parties –under the threat of military forces imminently breaking into the chamber– were able to revoke the martial law decree in line with Article 77 (5) of the Korean constitution. Yoon Suk-Yeol was forced to pull the military and rescind martial law after six hours. Korea narrowly escaped authoritarian rule.

Not only did this political bombshell shock an unprepared nation, it also left the international public bewildered. Forty-five years had passed since martial law had been last imposed by the previous authoritarian government, when the long-time military dictator, Park Chung-Hee (1961-79), had been assassinated by the head of the National Intelligence Service (NIS) for reasons that have largely remained a mystery to this day. Korea is obviously no longer under the iron fist of the military but has developed into a vibrant democracy and a prosperous country since the peaceful transition in the late 1980s. The country's past economic and democratic development dazzled the international community. But it is now news about K-pop celebrities like BTS and Blackpink, the latest K-Drama on Netflix, or the release of flashy mobile devices that catch the attention of global audiences, rather than Korean domestic politics. Even the regular provocations by the North Korean regime, whether missile testing or trash-carrying balloons, have become little more than footnotes in international news bulletins.

The short-lived but dramatic episode under martial law puzzles and raises questions about the state of Korean democracy, previously considered as one of the most successful third-wave democracies and even called "miraculous" (Diamond 2013; Hahm 2008). It had been barely eight years since the spectacular impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye (2013-17) over the abuse of power and corruption involving some of the best-known Korean business conglomerates, the so-called chaebols. The experience under the Yoon Suk-Yeol administration suggests further evidence of *democratic backsliding*, the undermining and dismantling of democratic institutions and norms by elected governments (Bermeo 2016; Haggard and Kaufman 2021). Choi (2022) describes not only Park Geun-Hye but also her conservative predecessor, Lee Myung-Bak (2008-13), as "semi-democratic rulers", while GW Shin (2020) laments "democratic decay" for which he also assigns responsibility to the progressive government of Moon Jae-In (2017-24; see also Kim 2016; DC Shin 2021a; KY Shin 2021b on Korean democracy backsliding). Do these developments confirm Diamond's (2015, 150) early assessment of "democratic recession" in Korea? Has the country joined the growing number of liberal democracies where authoritarianism is on the rise?

Though not calling into question obvious episodes of democratic regression, this article challenges arguments of Korean democracy backsliding and instead points to a *democratic rollercoaster*: ascent under progressive leadership followed by sharp decline under right-wing administrations. In other words, our analysis demonstrates a distinct pattern of autocratisation under consecutive right-wing leadership, whereas centre-left administrations have persistently advanced liberal democratic standards, including the democratic restoration under President Moon Jae-In. The resilience of Korean democracy is also evidenced in the swift uprising against Yoon Suk-Yeol's declaration of martial law and the subsequent successful impeachment of the president, initiated by the National Assembly and confirmed by the Constitutional Court. The democratic order was formally restored through a snap presidential election, which lifted the previously defeated opposition candidate, Lee Jae-Myung, into the highest office of the land. Notwithstanding the shown democratic resilience, a profound crisis of Korean democratic politics and considerable risks in the

country's democratic development are acknowledged. Understanding democratic consolidation as exceeding Huntington's (1991) minimalist test of two consecutive peaceful handovers of power but as encompassing *democratic deepening* (Diamond 1999; Linz and Stepan 1996), growing public dissatisfaction with the performance of the political system and a corresponding legitimacy crisis of politics is a source of concern, as well as the struggle to strengthen the robustness of democratic institutions after initially impressive progress in the consolidation of its young democracy. In Korea's democratic *stagnation*, this research underscores the erosion of the government's problem-solving capacity in the face of pervasive economic insecurity among Koreans from all walks of life. It is this insecurity rooted in the country's highly dualised labour market and, indeed, anxiety about the future that has fuelled mounting dissatisfaction with Korean politics.

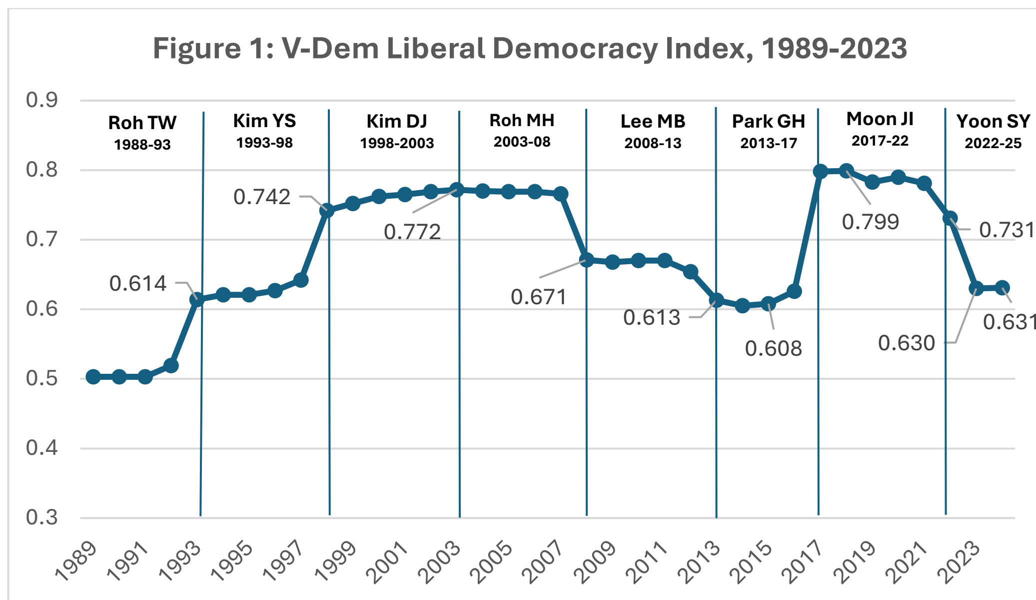
In the next section, the review of democratic development from the first civilian government of Kim Young-Sam (1993-98) to the botched imposition of martial law and Yoon Suk-Yeol's removal from office reveals Korea's *democratic rollercoaster*, followed by a discussion of civil society activism and popular uprising in response to democratic regression as evidence of democratic resilience and consolidation. Turning towards democratic stagnation, the article challenges two long-standing viewpoints that see, in a path-dependent manner, the struggle for democratic consolidation grounded in either the country's Confucian culture or the legacy of the authoritarian military regime. The latter considers the representative failure of political parties (especially, the progressive Democratic Party) at the heart of Korea's democratic crisis, whereas our argument of a democratic rollercoaster points to the lingering of residual authoritarianism in the conservative party. Nevertheless, not only does this research rebut fatalistic views of the party system, it also underlines the emergence of programmatic party competition, in defiance of received wisdom, as evidence for the responsiveness of political parties and democratic consolidation. This is followed by the proposal of an institutionalist account of Korean democratic development and stagnation that highlights constitutional flaws of the political system and the chaebol-dominated economy, before concluding the article with a discussion of the findings. Besides political-economic reforms that curb chaebols' economic and political power, this institutionalist perspective informs our argument that constitutional reform recalibrating the relationship between the executive and the legislature is imperative, and this with the priority objective of strengthening the party-political system. More specifically, it is the contention of the research that it is fundamentally the Korean constitutional architecture that has been holding back political parties and, thereby, impeding democratic progress.

Korean Democracy on a Rollercoaster

The president is at the heart of the Korean political system. The notion of the "imperial president" is omnipresent in public and academic discourses to encapsulate the extraordinary power resources that are widely attributed to the head of state. Korea's "hyper-presidentialism" (Croissant 2002) rests on comprehensive veto and bureaucratic powers in a highly centralised system (including far-reaching presidential decrees and the control over the Board of Audit and Inspection; Articles 53, 78 and 97 of the Korean constitution), in addition to the comprehensive appointment and dismissal powers across the public sector (including in the judiciary, security forces, tax authorities, and media) as a decisive means to establish the foundations for *imperial* rule (Articles 78, 89, 104 and 111). Furthermore,

the president has vital legislative agenda-setting rights (Article 52), while lawmakers only have, quite unusually, the authority to *cut* the government's proposed budget. If they wish to *increase* any budget item, the constitution requires the government's consent (Article 57). Not only do the president's budget powers deprive parliamentarians of shaping public policies in reflection of the political priorities they campaigned on, but the executive-driven process is also regarded as crucial for presidential pork-barrel spending as a powerful tool in Korean (electoral) politics (Horiuchi and Lee 2008; Kwon 2005). The hybrid character of the Korean presidency, blending strong executive powers of presidential systems with features commonly associated with parliamentary systems (including also the appointment of MPs to the cabinet; not excluded in the so-called "incompatibility" provision of Article 24), has created a powerful head of state and government by international standards, which left the parliament relatively weak (see also Hahm 2024, 82-106; Mosler 2020). The head of state furnished with sweeping institutional powers makes it easy to perceive the risks when presidents are ready to abuse their authority (particularly, their influence over the judiciary, security forces, and media).

The V-Dem Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) scores reveal Korea's extraordinary dependence on the democratic practices of its leadership, rather than a secular development of democratic backsliding. It is during the tenure of conservative presidents that the reversal of democratic advances achieved during progressive administrations is observed (see Figure 1). Kim Young-Sam, as the first civilian president, is credited with moving Korea out of the democratic grey zone (1993 V-Dem score: 0.614), particularly by tackling corruption, granting a comprehensive political amnesty to former regime dissidents and driving efforts to dismantle secret networks in the military (Cha 1993). But it was not before the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008) that Korean democracy consolidated at advanced international standards. V-Dem data, however, show a dramatic deterioration during the right-wing administrations of Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye, which reversed all democratic progress of the centre-left presidencies and were labelled as "an episode of autocratization" by the V-Dem Institute (2023, 29). Lee Myung-Bak reestablished the abuse of judicial authority in a retaliatory fashion similar to that of the military government, for which the Supreme Prosecutor's Office was a vital tool (Choi 2022, 324-27; Nilsson-Wright 2022, 15). National security, election and defamation laws were instrumental in suppressing freedom of expression, while media freedom suffered additional restrictions through the creation of a new regulatory body, the Korea Communications Commission, and partisan appointments in the sector. Freedom House eventually downgraded the Korean media in 2010 to "partly free" citing government censorship (Haggard and You 2015).



Note: The LDI is a composite index that measures the adherence to the principles of electoral and liberal democracy (including the rule of law, separation of powers, freedom of press, and civil liberties) based on country expert assessments (V-Dem Institute 2025, 5; see for a critical review: Little and Meng 2024).

Park Geun-Hye, the daughter of Park Chung-Hee, began her tenure with *progressive* policies (e.g., universalising childcare provision and improving old-age security) that acknowledged the shortcomings of her predecessor and recognised popular demand for social welfare (Lee 2018; Nilsson-Wright 2022, 14). This, however, did not prevent democratic regress. As with Lee Myung-Bak, the appointment and dismissal of public officials remained an essential instrument for control over the judiciary and security services and the suppression of government opposition. Surpassing the backsliding under the previous administration, Park Geun-Hye blacklisted thousands of progressive writers, artists and others in the creative sector to exclude critics of her administration from government-sponsored programmes. The two conservative presidents primarily relied on *executive aggrandisement* (that is, "when elected executives weaken checks on executive power" to undermine the opposition's capacity to challenge government; Bermeo 2016, 10), but also pursued *strategic election manipulation* (that is, "tilting the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents"; ibid., 13) when the NIS supported Park Geun-Hye's presidential bid by orchestrating smear campaigns against opposition candidates on social media (Choi 2022, 327-30; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018, 909). Democratic crisis under Park Geun-Hye culminated in the so-called Choi-Gate. The president's long-time friend and confidante, Choi Soon-Sil, not only had access to privileged government business and exercised huge influence without any formal role, but she was also central in industrial-scale chaebol bribery for government favours (Shin and Moon 2017, 105; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018, 908-9).

When the Moon Jae-In administration repaired the damage left by their conservative predecessors, the V-Dem Democracy Report lauded Korea as "a rare example of a country that halted and turned around a period of autocratization" (V-Dem Institute 2022, 19). Not only did the new government achieve record V-Dem LDI scores exceeding those of the two previous progressive administrations, but Korea was also catapulted into V-Dem's Top 10% – the only Asian country to earn this accolade. The Bertelsmann Foundation (2024, 11-2), in

Korea's country report to their Transformation Index, underscored that Moon Jae-In "throughout his tenure (…) took steps to strengthen the rule of law" and "significantly improved press and internet freedoms". Reporters Without Borders also recorded significant progress in their World Press Freedom Index: from the 70th place at the end of the Park Geun-Hye presidency, Korea made a big jump to the 41st spot (Reporters Without Borders website). Against this record, it puzzles that Shin (2022, 3) arrives at the conclusion that Moon Jae-In "presided over a period of democratic decay". There are valid reasons to suggest that his government did not fully live up to the high expectations when taking over the reins after the Park Geun-Hye crisis. It failed, for example, in its goal to achieve the 30th rank in the World Press Freedom Index, and shortcomings at the centre of power are recognised as having damaged the administration's moral authority – here, most prominently, the appointment of a close aide, Cho Kuk, to the Minister of Justice despite (later confirmed) criminal allegations and ethical lapses (Chang and Yun 2022, 47-8; Nilsson-Wright 2022, 18-9). There is, nevertheless, strong empirical evidence to associate the Moon Jae-In presidency with the restoration of liberal democratic standards rather than democratic backsliding.

Korean democracy experienced another dramatic dive when the conservative Yoon Suk-Yeol assumed the presidency. Even before the proclamation of martial law, V-Dem's LDI score dropped sharply (2023: 0.63), and Korea eventually forfeited its V-Dem classification as a *liberal* democracy under the presidency of the former prosecutor general (V-Dem Institute 2025, 14). The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) presents a similar assessment in its Democracy Index. Following a peak under Moon Jae-In in 2021 (8.16 out of 10, and ranked 16th in the world), the country slipped eight places in the EIU ranking following Yoon Suk-Yeol's election (2022: 8.03) and dropped another eight spots after the martial law episode (2024: 7.75). Not only was this Korea's lowest score since the start of the Democracy Index in 2006, but it also became a *flawed* democracy in the EIU assessment, as the country had been during Park Geun-Hye's leadership (2015: 7.97; Economist Intelligence Unit 2025, 22-3).

Yoon Suk-Yeol entered politics without any political experience, but having investigated high-profile cases (including the Park Geun-Hye and Cho Kuk scandals) allowed him to establish a "strong-man" image and nurture a public perception of an unwavering commitment to "clean government" (Shin 2022, 5-6). His presidency, nevertheless, bore a resemblance to the democratic backsliding under the two previous conservative administrations from the outset. Signs of democratic regression were difficult to ignore even before he assumed office. The Bertelsmann Foundation (2024, 9) described the presidential election as "marred by mudslinging and politically motivated investigations, which skirt the line of 'fair' election practices". Both political camps can be criticised for prioritising personal attacks instead of putting their reform agendas centre-stage (Yun 2023, 226). But it was the conservatives who ultimately pushed a profoundly divisive and aggressive campaign, best exemplified by blaming "selfish" women for the country's ultra-low fertility rate and questioning the promotion of gender equality to drive a wedge between young men and women. Particularly, Yoon Suk-Yeol's denial of gender inequality –used to justify the populist election pledge to abolish the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family (an old chestnut from the Lee Myung-Bak era)– was rather grotesque, since Korea was recognised for one of the worst gender inequalities among the developed democracies by independent international organisations. In the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, for instance, Korea was

ranked 94th (out of 146 countries), sandwiched between Guatemala and Belize (World Economic Forum 2024). The controversial campaign strategy paid off: a massive swing among young men proved decisive for the paper-thin victory by only 0.7 percentage points (Lee 2024).

In office, besides the political abuse of the prosecution service, Yoon Suk-Yeol utilised defamation laws to silence criticism in the media and produce self-censorship, while sidelining those he deemed critical towards his administration (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 11-2; V-Dem Institute 2025, 26-7). The conservative-led Seoul City government withdrew, in a punitive manner, public funding from a broadcaster that was accused of "bias" against the government. It received sharp international criticism that the government "threaten[ed] the public's right to information and encourag[ed] harassment of journalists" (Reporters Without Borders, September 5, 2022). Korea dropped to 62nd place in the organisation's World Press Freedom Index. Yoon Suk-Yeol's strong-man persona also translated into an adversarial leadership approach with rhetoric reminiscent of the country's military regime, which used the threat from North Korea and communism as a smokescreen to legitimise political oppression of opposition parties, labour, and the student movement (Heo and Stockton 2005). The president denouncing the opposition as "anti-state forces" (Korea Herald, December 16, 2024), "pinko" and "pro-North Korean commies" (9Dashline, September 6, 2023), alongside a "war on unions" (Korea Herald, June 12, 2023), thus came straight from the old playbook. Division over policy towards North Korea and, indeed, the fear of communism (especially among senior citizens) remained a powerful cleavage in democratic Korea, ready to be exploited for partisan polarisation and right-wing civil society mobilisation (Moon 2023; Yang 2020). In this context, it is important to underline that Korea maintained a loose *legal* definition of what constitutes *pro-North Korea* and *anti-state forces*. When instructing the security services to arrest politicians from opposition parties, the leader of his party and NEC officials, the president advised the NIS chief: "I'll give the NIS anti-communist investigation authority" (cited in Chosun Daily, December 6, 2024). External observers were evidently right to remain concerned about the "persistent risk" of the NIS suppressing opposition forces under the guise of national security (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 9; see also Amnesty International 2012).

Yoon Suk-Yeol's refusal to compromise or even engage with the opposition caused an unprecedented confrontation in the National Assembly and a record number of presidential vetoes (among others, to block special counsels investigating criminal and corruption allegations against the first lady). The use of presidential power to protect his spouse was controversial among some conservatives, too, including the party chairman (Jung 2024, 223-24; Korea Herald, December 16, 2024). From the very beginning, Yoon Suk-Yeol was little more than a lame duck because of political mistakes reflecting his inexperience and failure to recognise the inadequacy of his "prosecutorial" approach to politics: vilifying the political opposition as an enemy that needed to be defeated, while portraying himself as virtuous with the mission to eradicate the "bad" (see also Ahn 2023). Polarisation aggravated and produced an increasingly disruptive opposition that used the limited muscle of the legislature, while voters turned against the president in the general election. The opposition maintained its control over the National Assembly and only narrowly missed securing a two-thirds majority. The increasingly frustrated president pulled the trigger in a stand-off over the budget. His earlier tunes from the authoritarian era featured prominently in the declaration of martial law, as he claimed "to protect the free Republic of Korea from the

threats of the North Korean communist forces, to eradicate the shameless pro-North anti-state forces that plunder the freedom and happiness of our people and to safeguard the free constitutional order" (cited in Korea Herald, December 3, 2024). Yoon Suk-Yeol obviously did not confine himself to the rhetoric of the military dictatorship but resorted to its iron fist. Democratic backsliding did not stop at *executive aggrandisement* and *strategic election manipulation* but culminated in an attempt at an *executive coup* – that is, the increasingly rare incident of "a freely elected chief executive suspending the constitution outright in order to amass power in a swift sweep" (Bermeo 2016, 7).

The Constitutional Court *unanimously* upheld the National Assembly's impeachment of the president, as in the case of Park Geun-Hye. In their ruling on Yoon Suk-Yeol, the justices were unambiguous that there was, "even considering all of the [president's] claims, […] no objective justification" for the declaration of martial law, thereby refuting the president's and the ruling party's assertion of a *parliamentary coup* by the political opposition. Instead, the court's conclusion that the president "violated the fundamental principles of the rule of law and democracy, undermined the constitutional order, and seriously threatened the stability of the democratic republic" corresponded with the common literature understanding of an *executive coup*. The justices underlined that Yoon Suk-Yeol had to resolve political confrontation with parliament and alleged election fraud "through political, institutional, or judicial means, not by mobilizing military forces", while noting that he had a chance to persuade the public of the direction of his government in the general election. But he evidently did not win over the electorate for his agenda. Not only did he fail to observe his "duty to unite the society, transcending his support base", but ultimately "attempted to exclude the will of the people" (cited from the full English transcript of the Constitutional Court's impeachment ruling; Korea Times, April 4, 2025).

A clear picture of Korean democratic development emerges: three conservative administrations reversed the democratic advances made during progressive leadership and returned V-Dem LDI scores to the levels of the early 1990s. Conservative elites in the party and state apparatus might have learned how to (reluctantly) hand over power after electoral defeat, but they have not overcome their authoritarian legacy. This is most dramatically evidenced in the martial law episode, but the questioning of core liberal democratic values is also apparent in the two earlier conservative administrations.

Democratic Resilience: Civil Society Mobilisation

The successful impeachment of Park Geun-Hye and Yoon Suk-Yeol, alongside the subsequent snap elections, formally restored Korea's democracy through democratic and judicial processes. In the case of the former, this was followed by the progressive Moon Jae-In administration's restoration of liberal democratic standards after autocratisation under conservative rule, as discussed earlier. But, *in the first place*, it was mass civil society mobilisation that was vital for Park Geun-Hye's impeachment, and ad-hoc protests in front of the National Assembly under the threat from the military and police that secured opposition MPs' entry to the parliament building to overrule Yoon Suk-Yeol's martial law decree. These extraordinary uprisings, however, should not detract from the recognition of earlier civil society activism that forced Lee Myung-Bak into concessions. He assumed office with momentum from an unprecedented landslide victory and the securing of a parliamentary

majority in early April 2008. Yet, the president faced strong political headwinds just a couple of months after the inauguration when agreeing in late April to lift a ban on American beef in background talks about a free trade agreement. Job approval ratings dived instantly, dropping below 20% in May, and protests emerged that built on *peaceful* candlelight vigils in 2002 in response to the acquittal of two US soldiers who killed, driving in a 54-ton armoured vehicle to a friend's birthday party, two Korean middle school girls. As in 2002, ordinary Koreans from different walks of life took to the streets, in fear of what Koreans considered unsafe food. Protests by nearly one million citizens in Seoul on June 10 successfully demanded a government U-turn. But this only provided the president a minimal recovery in public support. Sparked by the import of American beef but exacerbated by police heavy-handedness against protesters, these popular rallies turned into broader months-long anti-government protests (Hwang and Willis 2020, 263-66; Moon 2009, 120-24). Protests did not disappear during the Lee Myung-Bak presidency, as the global financial crisis brought Koreans much economic hardship and drove up youth unemployment. Students took to the streets over sharp increases in tuition fees in the largely private higher education sector. They made the self-declared "economy president", who had started out with an outspoken "neoliberal" agenda of competition and small government, reverse previous deregulation of tuition fees and commit to substantial fee cuts and a new national scholarship programme boosting student financial aid (Lee, Kim, and Lee 2020).

Not only does Lee Myung-Bak's experience raise questions about the actual powers of the imperial president, it is also the social protest from his administration that reemerged in the Park Geun-Hye crisis in 2016 when the conservative party was holding on to power in contempt of the public, outraged over bribery and illegality at the heart of government. Civil society organisations, trade unions and opposition parties joined forces in mobilising for weekly candlelight protests, which drew their main support from the college-educated middle class and opposition-party supporters. The conservatives eventually split under pressure from an unprecedented 1.9 million citizens in Seoul and 2.3 million nationwide protesting on December 3. Six days later, the National Assembly impeached the president. Weekly protests continued until the Constitutional Court confirmed Park Geun-Hye's removal from office. The candlelight vigils lasted for a total of six months, and an estimated 17 million Koreans actively participated in these anti-government protests (Cho and Hwang 2021; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018). Kang (2019, 46) succinctly underscores "the participants' faith in democracy" in this extraordinary mobilisation. The snap election served the conservatives a resounding defeat, with their presidential candidate barely securing a quarter of the vote. Citizens unambiguously punished the governing party for its failures, and they afforded the progressive Moon Jae-In a strong mandate for social and political reform.

Instead of reducing the episodes of conservative attacks on democracy to backsliding, we highlight Korea's remarkable democratic resilience. The importance of civil society and taking protests to the streets is widely recognised for Korea's democratic development (Cho 2023; Hwang and Willis 2020; Shin 2022). But we also emphasise that it is difficult to separate these expressions of popular dissent and challenges to the ruling class in political crises from democratic consolidation, which entails the development of a robust civil society with the capacity to hold political elites accountable and successfully challenge their misconduct, if needed (Diamond 1999, 75; Linz and Stepan 1996, 7-8).

Confucianism Frustrating Democracy?

Remarkable democratic resilience in political crises notwithstanding, Korean democratic development reveals serious challenges: the country not only allowing episodes of democratic backsliding but also its struggles with *deepening democracy* after an initially impressive democratic consolidation. What has been holding back further democratic consolidation and even allowed repeated episodes of democratic regression? Culturalist accounts have long pointed at Confucianism, with its hierarchical and anti-pluralist orientation, as compromising democratic consolidation and, indeed, accounting for Korea's vulnerability to democratic backsliding (Heo and Hahm 2014; DC Shin 2021a). And political paternalism rooted in Confucian ideology is thought to have informed Park Geun-Hye's attitude to governing like a "benevolent queen" rather than a democratic head of state (Croissant and Kim 2020, 33). She might have perceived a paternalistic mission, but path-dependence arguments about the Confucian legacy impeding democratic progress are nevertheless at odds with repeated mass civil society activism that has successfully challenged the government, as well as the secular decline of Confucianism in Korean society. Having said this, considerable popular support for a strong leader could be viewed as prima facie evidence for Confucian ideology frustrating democratic consolidation. Data from the Pew Research Center (2024, 12) documents not only louder calls for a strong leader without interference from courts and parliament (considered "good" rather than "bad": from 23% in 2017 to 35% in 2023) but also growing support for a technocratic government of experts (from 49% to 66%, ibid, 14). DC Shin (2021a) suggests widespread support for an *electoral autocracy* over democracy. Questions could be raised about the extent to which support for a strong leader and technocrats, as recorded in survey data, indicates a genuine shift away from democracy. Yet, it is difficult to ignore that, after the initial shock of the martial law decree, a significant minority of about one-third of Koreans opposed Yoon Suk-Yeol's impeachment. He continued to receive particularly strong support from senior citizens (Gallup Korea 2025, 15-6). Here, it is important though to appreciate that the leader of the opposition, Lee Jae-Myung, had been engulfed in legal controversies and enjoyed little popularity in the run-up for the presidential election, with only about one-third of the electorate expressing support for him as the country's future president (ibid., 12-3; New York Times, December 3, 2024).

It is a cause for concern in any case, however, that data indicate mounting frustration with the performance of the political system. In 2024, six in ten Koreans (61%) were not satisfied with how democracy was functioning, up five percentage points from 2021 (Pew Research Center 2024, 53; 2021a, 16). The vast majority of Koreans support comprehensive political reform: 38% in 2021 calling for "major changes" and 46% even concluding that the political system "needs to be completely reformed". This placed Korea in the group of countries with the highest popular demand for political reform, exceeded only by the United States, Italy, and Spain (ibid., 10). The cross-national survey data from the Pew Research Center also reveal that Korea is by no means unique. Similar surges in support for strong leaders and technocracy, as well as dissatisfaction with political performance, in countries that do not share Korea's cultural legacy lend further support to questioning that it is Confucianism that frustrates Korean democracy. Fukuyama (2015) argues that, in many democracies, the legitimacy of the political system hinges more on the state's capacity to satisfy the popular demand for high-quality services than on the deepening of democratic institutions. There are good reasons to include Korea among the countries where successive governments'

failure to deliver has compromised the unqualified support of democratic principles and created political toxicity. In the 2022 OECD Risks That Matter Survey, 61% of working-age Koreans expressed worries about job security and income loss in the next year or two, which was high by international standards (OECD average: 51%; OECD 2023, 17). Social protection in Korea has not kept pace with labour market dualisation, despite significant advances in welfare state development (particularly during the Moon Jae-In administration, when social expenditure increased from 10.1% of GDP in 2017 to 14.8% in 2022; OECD 2024). Pervasive insecurity and anxiety about the future have not only fuelled the above-mentioned *Gender War* between young men and women (Lee 2024), but have also suppressed the country's fertility rate (recording a historical low of 0.72 in 2023). Even labour market insiders, who *should* be confident about their future, struggle to escape the perception of debilitating insecurity (Fleckenstein, Lee, and Mohun Himmelweit 2023). Eom and Kwon (2024) show an alarming association between economic insecurity and the risk of developing a more authoritarian value orientation.

The Failure of Political Parties as Part of "the State"?

It is also a long-standing and, in fact, more dominant view that the crisis of Korean democracy –its failure to consolidate after impressive initial progress– is fundamentally rooted in political parties' failure to perform their representative function. Despite the evident democratic shortcomings of the conservative party, this literature is bizarrely preoccupied with the progressive Democratic Party (and its predecessors), which is argued to have failed those at the margins of Korean society. And, indeed, labour market deregulation during the Kim Dae-Jung administration in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis is considered at the heart of social polarisation. The Democratic Party is thus commonly classified as *liberal* in an effort to distinguish it from leftist parties with social-democratic and more firmly redistributive welfare state projects in European democracies. Dissatisfied with the Democratic Party, this literature routinely portrays social movement organisations as the key vehicles for political and social progress, even elevating them to *pseudo-political parties* or *quasi-legislative organisations*. They are seen as performing the representative function in Korean democracy that is usually assigned to political parties (Fiori and Kim 2011; Lee 2009; Lee and Kim 2019). In line with the prevailing view of the faults of Korean political parties, Shin (2022) also regards civil society challenging "the state" as a central feature of Korean democratisation, while he considers political parties as part of the state. Distinguishing between civil society and popular protest on the one hand and political parties on the other, he underlines the importance of the former and dismisses the latter.

Our observation of a democratic rollercoaster, however, draws attention to the conservative party and, more broadly, conservative elites in the state and society at the heart of democratic crises and backsliding, rather than the progressive party or Confucianism in culturalist accounts (with the latter failing to account for differences between political leaderships). It is particularly puzzling in this context that Wong (2019) does not recognise the autocratisation under Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye as "democratic spoilers", in his terminology. Instead, his argument of democratic resilience puts centre-stage the conservative party's observance of democratic rules, clearly an empirically flawed argument. While Wong considers the anti-authoritarian cleavage "neutralized", GW Shin (2020, 108) takes the polar opposite view, contending that the Democratic Party still lives "in the past"

and is caught up in "battling authoritarianism". Shin is correct about the progressives' profound concerns about the lingering authoritarianism among conservative elites in the absence of a rupture in the transition from the military regime to democracy. Formal party changes and rebranding efforts notwithstanding, the conservative party has a clear lineage to the political party of the military dictatorship through the successor party of the regime merging with Kim Young-Sam's political party and the political vehicle of a former prime minister under Park Chung-Hee and the founding director of the KCIA, Kim Jong-Pil. The so-called grand conservative coalition was an endeavour to copy the electoral success story of Japan's conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP; Kihl 1991, 66). It is worth noting that, despite democratisation, "soft authoritarianism" was long associated with post-war Japan because of the LDP's monopolisation of political power (Johnson 1987, 143).

Not least in light of the attempted executive coup, however, Shin's dismissive portrayal of the Democratic Party is questionable. Progressives have, evidently, not been wrong about residual authoritarianism on the right. In recognition of anti-democratic practices not only among conservative party-political elites but also in the judiciary, security forces and government bureaucracy, the Moon Jae-In government made it a key agenda to hold those accountable who were involved in democratic backsliding under Park Geun-Hye, in addition to reforming the highly politicised prosecution service. The extensive power of prosecutors has its institutional foundation in the military regime, for which the judiciary was likewise a vital instrument in suppressing political opposition (see also Mobrand 2021 on the politics of prosecution reform). Not only the Bertelsmann Foundation (2024, 13) remarks unambiguously that the judiciary is "not completely free from governmental pressure" (highlighting that prosecutors are "not independent" but "prone to political influence"), the Democracy Report by the Economist Intelligence Unit also notes that Korean courts are "politicized" and the law being "employed as a tool to attack political opponents" (Economist Intelligence Unit 2025, 28; see also Choi 2022; Haggard and You 2015). Korean people share concerns over prosecutors: only 7.6% of respondents in the 2021 Korean General Social Survey express a "great deal of confidence" in the Supreme Prosecutor's Office, whereas a staggering 40.7% say they have "hardly any confidence at all" (calculated using Kim et al. 2023). Instead of simply deploring "bureaucratic purges" (Shin 2020, 102), one might, in principle, consider it vital to democratic resilience and, indeed, democratic consolidation to hold elected and *unelected* officials accountable for their roles in democratic backsliding. Korea's Public Officials Act stipulates that the duty of obedience to superiors (Article 57) is not unqualified, drawing on the higher-ranked duty of fidelity: "Every public official shall observe statutes or regulations, and faithfully perform his or her duties" (Article 56; Ministry of Government Legislation 2025). In line with legislation and confirmed by the Supreme Court, the official manual of the Code of Conduct for Civil Servants underlines that public officials must act within the bounds of the law (i.e. have a duty to obey *lawful* orders) and provides the legal grounds for *disobedience* to unlawful orders from their superiors (Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission 2021, 29-31).

Extraordinarily, the vast majority of conservative MPs remained loyal to Yoon Suk-Yeol and continued to fiercely oppose the president's impeachment despite his attempt to suspend democracy. In the second impeachment vote, merely 12 out of 108 conservative lawmakers supported his removal from office. This compares to at least 62 MPs (out of 174) in Park Geun-Hye's impeachment, which followed the temporary breakup of the conservative party. The parliamentary party even forced the party leader's resignation after he

reluctantly endorsed Yoon Suk-Yeol's impeachment and called for conservative MPs to vote according to their personal conscience. A senior member of the pro-Yoon faction was elected to lead the parliamentary party and the party's emergency committee after the dismissal of the Yoon-critical party chairman (Korea Herald, December 14, 2024; Korea Times, December 16, 2024). Doubts about conservative MPs' respect for the rule of law and the separation of powers can, furthermore, be raised in the context of their attempt – together with right-wing civil society organisations, which staged counter-protests as they did previously to candlelight vigils in 2017 (Hwang and Willis 2020, 269)– to physically obstruct the execution of court-issued search and arrest warrants at the presidential residence (Korea Herald, January 15, 2025). Their unshaken loyalty was echoed in some conservative media outlets and elite associations. The Chosun Daily attacked the impeachment as "lack[ing] legal justification" and insisted that Yoon Suk-Yeol was "within his constitutional powers" to declare martial law on the grounds of a "de facto Democratic Party-led government" and "North Korea's provocations" (Chosun Daily, December 6, 2024). A conservative organisation of some 6,300 university professors hailed the imposition of martial law as a "duty executed by the president" and deplored political and media pressures on the president to resign as "clearly acts of treason" (cited in Korea Herald, December 7, 2024), while an association of former diplomats denounced the impeachment as illegitimate, too (ibid.). The Constitutional Court evidently refuted these arguments as far as Korea's legal framework is concerned. It also caused concerns about the administration's respect for the rule of law when the acting presidents, first Prime Minister Han Duck-Soo and then the Minister of Economy and Finance Choi Sang-Mok (notably, two former career bureaucrats), refused to appoint a parliament-nominated Constitutional Court judge before the impeachment ruling in defiance of an earlier ruling of the Constitutional Court that confirmed their duty to do so (Korea Times, March 30, 2025).

The *post-martial-law* episode reveals additional evidence of a wide range of conservative elites failing to accept, let alone defend, core democratic principles, making it difficult to downplay the democratic regression under conservative leadership as merely a lingering of authoritarianism among a few at the heart of misguided administrations. Elites in the party and the state have clearly not accepted democracy as "the only game in town", a key condition in democratic consolidation. Yet, it is nevertheless prudent, following Diamond (1999, 66-7), to distinguish between conservative elites and party (the latter as a collective actor), at least in the first instance. While a political party is (naturally) led by elites, Diamond points out that rank-and-file members do not necessarily share all their beliefs. There may also be splits between party elites. Divisions within the conservative party, if not outright factionalism, are well-documented, including fundamental disagreements over the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye and Yoon Suk-Yeol. At this point, however, the evident failings of the conservative party make it impossible to perceive it as a "normal" party that has sufficiently embraced democratic principles and learned how to lose.

Challenging the Critique of Political Parties

In the following, the dominant critique of political parties is refuted: showing as to why the assumed dichotomy between political parties and civil society organisations is (empirically) problematic, in addition to challenging the assertion of non-programmatic parties at the heart of the argument of political parties' failure to represent. On the former, not only were

opposition parties and their supporters deeply involved in candlelight protests, it was also common practice in all progressive administrations to recruit civil society activists for government positions (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 19; Peng 2004). In fact, they frequently competed as progressive party candidates for elected office, including one of the most prominent civil society leaders successfully running on behalf of the Democratic Party for the Seoul mayoralty. Kim (2012, 60) considers this to "reveal a major challenge to South Korean democracy", but it could be viewed instead as testifying to a strength of the political left, namely the connection between progressive party and civil society organisations. In contradiction with the orthodox dichotomy argument, Kim himself notes that social movements "coordinate and cooperate with political parties" (2012, 59), and in the critique of the poor mediating capacity of the party system, it is pointed at the centre-left party taking political conflicts to the streets in progressive alliances instead of pursuing resolution in formal political institutions (Heo and Hahm 2014). While the Democratic Party lacks the historical connection with the labour movement we know from European countries (which is typically considered a structural weakness of progressive forces; Kwon 1997; Yang 2017), it is here underlined that late democratisation in Korea created a bond between progressive civil society organisations and the centre-left party, which rose to become the primary challenger of the conservative party that succeeded the political apparatus of the authoritarian regime. Meanwhile, the emergence and, indeed, growth of *conservative* civil society organisations –often associated with illiberalism and backsliding– was observed (Kim 2012; KY Shin 2021b). Does the conservative party fail to represent these sentiments, too? The literature with its focus on the disconnects of the Democratic Party has been unclear about the political right, but the evidence does not, prima facie, indicate a dichotomy between the conservative party and the right-wing civil society movement, either, in response to progressive governments.

There is also strong evidence to question the common assertion of fundamentally *non-programmatic* political parties, which is at the core of the argument that parties and, more generally, the political system have failed to perform their representative function. Instead of competing on policy platforms, received wisdom continues to portray personalised political parties as relying on pork-barrel spending for voter mobilisation in their regional strongholds and, hence, not representing broader popular demands. In this context, the absence of a viable leftist party is attributed to the discrediting of social-democratic ideas during the military dictatorship (Hellmann 2020; Lee 2009; Wong 2015). Regional cleavages rooted in the authoritarian industrialisation project and pork-barrel politics were indeed at the heart of electoral competition in the early democratic period. However, the 2002 presidential campaign of Roh Moo-Hyun marked a critical juncture, as the centre-left party embarked on offering meaningful progressive policies (including redistributive social policies and employment-promoting family policies) in recognition of non-regional cleavages. Roh Moo-Hyun's unexpected victory put a spotlight on ideology emerging in partisan competition and exposed fundamental weaknesses of the political right, which previously rejected public welfare provision on the grounds that it would undermine Confucian values. Park Geun-Hye accepted the imperative of conservative party modernisation in light of electoral demands for social policies and *conventional* cleavages gaining importance in Korean electoral politics. She, therefore, moved the conservative party towards the political centre on key socio-economic issues, and the electoral success of this strategy earned her the accolade of "queen of elections" (Kwon and Lim 2023; Lee 2018; Nilsson-Wright 2022).

Preoccupation with regionalism and pork-barrel politics indicates a path-dependent perspective that does not adequately appreciate the dynamic development of Korean democratic politics over the past twenty years or so. Besides the role of the progressive party in mobilising and representing popular dissent, it is vital to appreciate the rise of programmatic party competition as evidence of the responsiveness of Korean political parties to electoral demands. This presents another important dimension of democratic consolidation, namely the aggregation and representation of popular interests in public policy (Diamond 1999, 96; Randall and Svåsand 2002, 5-6).

Democratic Stagnation: An Institutionalist Account of Korean Democratic Development

Notwithstanding our rebuttal of the common critique of political parties, the profound challenges from the weakly institutionalised party system are taken most seriously here, especially the persistent problems in the consolidation of Korean parties despite the rise of programmatic party competition. Although extreme, the confrontation between Yoon Suk-Yeol and the opposition-controlled National Assembly was not, per se, new. Reform gridlock has long been associated with political decision-making in Korea – most notably, the failure to agree on policies that address widespread perceptions of economic insecurity in a more meaningful manner, as discussed above. While polarisation first emerged on the political right with the surge of "illiberal organizations" in response to progressive government policies (Kim 2012, 57-8), it deepened when imperial presidents' abuse of power pulled the two political sides further apart. Progressives saw their concerns about anti-democratic forces on the political right confirmed. Even before the bruising 2022 presidential election, nine in ten Koreans perceived either *strong* (40%) or *very strong* (50%) polarisation between supporters of different political parties, which moved Korea to eye-level with the United States as the most polarised country among the so-called advanced economies (Pew Research Center 2021b, 20). It would be easy to reduce political polarisation to a problem of the Korean political culture and then "blame" parties for their irresponsible behaviour. Indeed, political parties have a lot to answer for, not only the conservatives but also the Democratic Party for fuelling polarisation and their non-collaborative behaviour in the National Assembly. Resisting superficial support for culturalist explanations, however, institutional flaws in the political system are put centre-stage to account not only for the vulnerability of Korean democracy to backsliding but also for frustrating the consolidation of political parties. Our institutionalist argument, moreover, disputes assertions that associate the elite pact-making in the democratic transition, which produced the current constitutional structure, with successful democratisation (Hahm 2008; Wong 2019).

Political parties remain the weak link in Korean democratic consolidation. Their critical importance in democratic consolidation and, more generally, the working of democracy is widely recognised (Gunther and Diamond 2001, 7-9; Randall and Svåsand 2002). In addition to their basic functions in electoral democracy (namely, candidate nomination, electoral mobilisation, and the formation of government), the role of political parties in interest aggregation and representation is described as pivotal in democratic systems. Randal and Svåsand (2002, 5) underline their function as "not simply (…) reflecting popular demands" but also their "political 'educational' role" – that is, "contributing to the way such demands are understood and articulated and to public perception of political choice". In other words, political parties should not just follow the electorate and their demands but also *lead*.

Leaving no room for ambiguity in their assessment, Linz and Stepan (1996, 10) argue that "democratic consolidation requires parties" as one of the core institutions of what they call the "democratic political society". Though distinct from the civil society, they emphasise the complementarity between the two and highlight "intermediation between the state and society and the structuring of compromise" as key tasks of the political society. Weak political parties are unable to deliver on this. Their struggle with intermediation and conflict resolution has profound implications for the problem-solving capacity of the political system, jeopardising the public's perceived legitimacy of democracy as discussed earlier with reference to Fukuyama (2015). By contrast, when institutionalised well, political parties, Diamond (1999, 96) concludes, "tend to produce more consensual, sustainable policies and, hence, greater governability and legitimacy".

The Korean constitution, on the one hand, allows for an imperial president with the capacity to abuse their power for the suppression of political opposition, as evidenced by the democratic backsliding of the conservative presidencies of Lee Myung-Bak, Park Geun-Hye, and Yoon Suk-Yeol. On the other hand, the head of state paradoxically turns, despite being furnished with excessive powers, routinely into a "lame duck" as far as *policy* is concerned and becomes associated with reform gridlock in the face of mounting socio-economic challenges. Korean presidents struggle to implement the reform agendas they set out for their administrations. Not only do they often govern without parliamentary majorities (so-called divided governments), but they also confront considerable risks of losing control over their parliamentary party (most notably when heavyweights in the ruling party position themselves for the next presidential race). Little time passes before inter- and intra-party competition emerges in anticipation of the next election for the top job. This compromises party discipline and collaboration between parties for effective governance. In the absence of support from parliament and their party, presidents depend heavily on public approval ratings for their authority. Extensive polling in Korea not only reveals electoral preferences but also brutally exposes when the public becomes dissatisfied with government direction and turns away from political leadership. Pressure from polling on political elites can be "democracy-enhancing" (Kim and Lee 2024) when it facilitates democratic responsiveness, and the rise of programmatic party competition in Korea could be considered evidence for this. But opinion polls are a double-edged sword when job approval ratings become a key source of political legitimacy – that is, their potential subversive effect. Political momentum at the beginning of a presidency typically follows a struggle to maintain public support, which appears to decline almost inevitably and eventually give rise to lame ducks (Bae and Park 2018; Kang 2015; Yap 2019). This undermines governments' policy capacity, and in view of the typically short window for ambitious reform, Korea's one-term presidency is widely viewed as holding back problem-solving capacity.

Besides adverse party-political dynamics, the one-term limit is associated with a lack of continuity in policy-making, which is amplified by frequent personnel turnover in the cabinet and the administration more generally (e.g., the presidential office) in attempts at "resets" when facing political headwinds. In the past, the politically insulated government bureaucracy provided strategic long-term perspective (Haggard and Moon 1993; Kim 1991). Economic bureaucrats have remained powerful in the democratic era, but *elected* officials have challenged the dominance of the government bureaucracy and claimed the driving seat in policy-making. In this development, the National Assembly and political parties have also become more assertive (Kwon and Lim 2023; Lee 2018; Lee 2023). This should, in

principle, be considered democratic progress. Yet, the weak constitutional rights of parliament vis-à-vis an extremely privileged executive have compromised the consolidation of political parties. It is a central contention of this research that it is the "imperial president" with low policy capacity despite their dominant position in the political system that has undermined the problem-solving capacity of Korean politics by holding back the consolidation of political parties, and this shortcoming has been aggravated by political polarisation. The reversal of polarisation is vital for more collaborative political behaviour to restore the problem-solving capacity of the Korean political system. More collaboration between the political camps, however, is difficult to perceive without parties having greater ability to *shape* policy and, by extension, the prospect of *claiming credit* for their contribution to improving people's livelihoods. In the present constitutional framework, the opposition – even when holding a sound parliamentary majority– has limited, if any, capacity for meaningful impact on policy and thus deliver the policies they campaigned on, as illustrated by the confrontation between the Yoon Suk-Yeol administration and the National Assembly.

For good reasons, one might want to question some of the Democratic Party's disruptive behaviour in the build-up to the imposition of martial law. In the impeachment ruling, the Constitutional Court urged the National Assembly to show greater tolerance and respect for minority opinions. While pointing to the importance of "dialogue and compromise" in the relationship between the legislature and the executive, the justices also criticised –in what could be seen as challenging the imperial president– that Yoon Suk-Yeol failed to respect parliament "as a partner in governance" and, doing so, ultimately "undermine[d] the foundation of democratic politics" (cited in Korean Times, April 4, 2025). It took the president a staggering 720 days to meet with the leader of the opposition, a meeting that did not, however, produce any tangible results (Korea Herald, December 16, 2024). Constitutional ideals become obviously a remote prospect when the president refuses to engage with the majority party in parliament. A disruptive political opposition in the National Assembly is surely frustrating, and it does little, if anything, to advance policy-making. Yet, it is essential to appreciate that it is, fundamentally, hard to conceive alternative parliamentary means when discontent with the government's direction arises in the event of an imperial president who expects the National Assembly to merely rubber-stamp government policies, while exercising vetoes against legislation that secured majority support in the legislature. It is also this failure of mediation between the ruling and opposition parties, due to constitutional design flaws, that has driven the opposition onto the streets for extra-parliamentary pressure on the government. Put differently, the Korean political system incentivises confrontational political strategies that prioritise the discrediting of the president and undermine their political authority by suppressing job approval ratings for immediate gain over compromise building.

It is against this background that it is argued that a weak parliament with poor capacity to shape policy has perpetually undermined the consolidation of political parties by frustrating their ability to implement their election pledges and creating deadlocks in frequently divided governments. For more collaborative political behaviour, the strengthening of the National Assembly is inevitable (e.g., parliamentary budget powers and curbing presidential decree powers that allow the bypassing of the legislature). Parties with enhanced political and policy capacity are critical for improving problem-solving capacity, in addition to greater accountability, which, in turn, facilitates their institutionalisation. Constitutional reform that recalibrates the relationship between the executive and legislature is therefore

not only about clipping the wings of the *imperial* president to prevent their abuse of power (that is, democratic backsliding) but also about a more competent parliament to strengthen the party system – still the missing piece in Korean democratisation despite political parties having developed a more ideological value orientation and programmatic competition. This is not to argue for a weak government. In parallel, it is paradoxically vital to strengthen the executive – for example, the permission of two-term presidencies to boost *policy* capacity and accountability of the government by putting pressure on first-term presidents to deliver, in addition to promoting the cohesion of the ruling party. Frequent failures of presidents to deliver on their electoral pledges have created an increasingly cynical Korean public with little trust in their political parties and political system. The present gridlock between Korean political parties induced by institutional flaws in the constitutional architecture and reinforced by polarisation, however, makes it virtually impossible to deliver on the Korean public's fundamental expectation that it is "the government's role to fix problems" (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 30). This applies, in particular, to problems as monumental and complex as economic inequality and insecurity, the most pressing public concerns.

Democratic Stagnation and the Chaebol-Dominated Economy

Democratic progress and policy capacity do not hinge only on institutional reform of the political system. A constitution provides the institutional framework for decision-making, but politics does not operate in a power vacuum. Long before the *post-democracy* literature attesting a shift of power to business as undermining popular democracy and the policy capacity of government (Crouch 2004; Streeck 2014), Lindblom (1977, 356) had famously pointed out the democratic problem of economic concentration: "The large private corporation fits oddly into democratic theory. Indeed, it does not fit." It is difficult to think of an OECD country where big business enjoys a more "privileged position" than in Korea. This could be thought of as making the country the prime case for post-democratic politics, or put differently, the "businessfication" of politics (Hewison 2017). Chaebols dominate the economy, and their economic power has long afforded them enormous political influence, too, and this even more so since Kim Young-Sam's deregulation drive released businesses from much government regulation. Employers in democratic Korea have become increasingly vocal and politically more assertive advocates of further deregulation, while fiercely opposing redistributive efforts and re-regulation when attempts were made to push back labour market dualisation (Fleckenstein and Lee 2017; Kong 2000). Korean people recognise the necessity of changing the economic system, too: either calling for "major change" (58%) or even a "complete overhaul" (14%). Their demand for fundamental economic reform is only exceeded in the struggling Mediterranean economies of Italy (85%), Greece (84%), and Spain (83%) (Pew Research Center 2021a, 14).

Progressive governments have made efforts to curb the power of chaebols, but the extraordinary influence of big business on the conservative party has not been challenged. Their special relationship goes back to the authoritarian regime: it allowed the phenomenal rise of chaebols as part of the industrialisation strategy, but it extracted, at the same time, so-called "political taxes" from businesses for favourable treatment, even though Park Chung-Hee deplored the corruption under Syngman Rhee (1948-1960). These funds were critical for supporting the political apparatus and election campaigns of the ruling party, a practice that continued under Chun Doo-Hwan (1980-88) to sustain the authoritarian

government (Haggard and Moon 1990: 227; Fields 1997, 140-41). Park Geun-Hye was profoundly aware of the popular demand for change and thus put *economic democratisation* centre-stage in her presidential campaign, but she evidently turned away from this campaign pledge. Chaebol bribery blossomed under her leadership, including the Samsung heir, Lee Jae-Yong, paying kickbacks amounting to US$37.6 million in exchange for the National Pension Service approving, as a major shareholder, the merger of two Samsung subsidiaries that was considered disadvantageous for shareholders but secured Lee Jae-Yong's control over the Samsung empire (Shin and Moon 2017, 105; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018, 908-9). The collusion between the Park Geun-Hye administration and chaebols was reminiscent of the "crony capitalism" of the military regime and the government-business collusion that brought Korea to the brink of state bankruptcy in the Asian financial crisis of 1997/98 (Kang 2002).

Bankrolling politics has been underlined as an important mechanism for chaebols' stronghold over government and public policy (Kim 2007, 28; Oh and Rowley 2024; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018, 907). Among the most prominent examples, chaebol bribes filled President Roh Tae-Woo's (1988-1993) gigantic political slush fund (₩450 billion, approximately US$390 million; Korea Times, October 26, 2021), and chaebols' illegal campaign financing of the conservative party in the 2002 presidential election was an apparent attempt to prevent the victory of Roh Moo-Hyun (Lee 2004, 136-37; U.S. Department of State 2005). In office, Roh Moo-Hyun delivered comprehensive reforms of party funding and anti-corruption measures aiming to break the grip of money politics (including severe punishment for misconduct as a deterrent and the prohibition of any corporate political donations) (Chu and Im 2013, 123; Sim 2018, 341). It has been acknowledged that "the extent of money-driven politics at election times has declined substantially in recent years" (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 8), and this is important democratic progress. Big business, however, still uses its financial firepower to exert illicit influence over the government. Not only was Park Geun-Hye imprisoned, but Lee Myung-Bak also received a 17-year sentence for accepting chaebol bribes that filled his illegal fund of ₩25.2 billion (approximately US$17.3 million) for political campaigning and personal expenses (Korea Herald, October 29, 2020).

The extraordinary position of chaebols in the Korean political economy is also reflected in the pardoning of business leaders for the *sake of the national economy*, a practice of both conservative and progressive presidents. Presidential pardons can be seen as having continuously undermined business adherence to the rule of law, notably failing to deter them from illicit influence peddling (Bertelsmann Foundation 2024, 10, 33). Among the bribes Lee Myung-Bak received, a court found that Samsung paid US$5.8 million for the pardoning of its chairman, Lee Kun-Hee (Joong-Ang Daily, October 5, 2018). Moon Jae-In started with the ambition to challenge the chaebol-dominated political economy, among others reflected in his wage-led growth strategy and the administration's recruitment of a prominent civil society activist, nicknamed the "chaebol sniper" (Joon-Ang Daily, June 21, 2019). The president initially resisted domestic and foreign pressures to pardon Lee Kun-Hee's son, jailed for bribing the Park Geun-Hye administration, but the government eventually capitulated to growing pressure and released the Samsung heir on parole in consideration of "the country's economic situation and the conditions of the global economy" (cited in Korea Times, August 13, 2021). Besides the chairman of the fifth largest chaebol (that is, Lotte), who was also imprisoned for bribery during the Park Geun-Hye presidency, Lee Jae-Yong was unsurprisingly pardoned by Yoon Suk-Yeol, allowing the chaebol scion to formally

ascend the Samsung throne (Korea Times, August 12, 2022). Without an overhaul of pardoning practice, it is difficult to conceive that powerful business elites genuinely recognise that they are subject to the rule of law, too. Bertelsmann Foundation (2024, 33) points out that "while courts tend to hand down harsh sentences against former public officials, they tend to be much more lenient when it comes to corruption in the private sector". This lenience towards business leaders and their eventual pardoning not only undermines important anti-corruption efforts made but also leaves Korean democracy extremely vulnerable.

Discussion and Conclusions

Korea's democracy had been under attack. Yet, backsliding under conservative rule should not detract from democratic consolidation and remarkable resilience: advances under progressive administrations and civil society uprisings in democratic crises. Their erosion of faith in political elites notwithstanding, citizens have not turned their backs on democracy but were quick to mobilise in the streets to hold the government to account, as shown in candlelight protests on numerous occasions and the rapid uprising against the imposition of martial law. It is not the intention to downplay the shortcomings of progressive party governments (and, indeed, the Democratic Party in opposition), but V-Dem data and other international observers also underscore impressive democratic progress under centre-left presidents. However, not least in consideration of the public's political dissatisfaction, all political forces ought to take a firm look in the mirror. While Yoon Suk-Yeol's successful impeachment and the snap election that followed were an essential first step in democratic restoration, it is uncertain whether Korea will experience a rollercoaster ascent resembling the efforts of the Moon Jae-In administration after the Park Geun-Hye crisis. The country's strong and increasingly deep-rooted political polarisation presents a major challenge here. In any case, it is a profound concern that autocratisation under multiple conservative administrations calls into question the conservatives having become a "normal" political party that has learned how to lose. Their elites have evidently not restricted themselves to garnering electoral support through popular social policies, for example, but have also resorted to *executive aggrandisement*, *strategic election manipulation*, and eventually an *executive coup*. In the most recent crisis, it is alarming that the conservative party at large appears to have remained loyal to Yoon Suk-Yeol despite the apparent violation of the constitution and his blatant disregard for core democratic principles. Their behaviour, besides conservative media and civil society mobilisation in support of Yoon Suk-Yeol, does not allow for reducing the botched executive coup to the actions of a few at the heart of a misguided administration. Instead, this episode reveals a wider stubborn persistence of authoritarian thought among conservatives.

Resisting an overstatement of democratic backsliding in light of important democratic consolidation and resilience, democratic stagnation is nevertheless recognised. This research demonstrates how fundamental institutional flaws in the Korean political system and the chaebol-dominated economy render Korean politics and democracy vulnerable, as most dramatically exposed in the episodes of democratic backsliding but also evident in the decline of problem-solving capacity. Sharp divides in parliament have deadlocked politics, and business has repeatedly been successful, though not in an unqualified manner, in obstructing policies for social progress. It is this political immobilism that lies at the core of the crisis

of Korean democratic politics and the deep frustration among the electorate. Fukuyama has made a strong case for democracy hinging more on the government's delivery of policy than on the deepening of democratic institutions. Having said this, the article has demonstrated that the policy capacity of the Korean political system (most notably, ensuring the economic security that ordinary Koreans long for) is closely tied to *the deepening of democracy*, particularly the strengthening of the National Assembly and the party-political system.

This research, therefore, resists chiming in with the criticism of political parties but rebuts the fatalistic views of the Korean party system. This is not to deny the existence of serious problems, but to argue that the representative and mediating functions of political parties have been fundamentally hindered by institutional flaws in the political system, instead of dismissing parties as a *failure* and turning away from them. Challenging arguments that associate successful democratisation with elite pact-making in the democratic transition, it is argued that constitutional choices at this critical juncture have imposed severe limits on democratic consolidation by inadvertently holding back political parties. Poor mediation between the executive and political parties, as well as insufficient mediation capacity of the latter more generally, are inherent design features of the Korean political system. It is not surprising, though, that the role of political parties was not adequately considered in the pact between the military and democratic opposition leaders. It is well documented that Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung regarded their highly personalised parties primarily as vehicles for their presidential ambitions. They were primarily preoccupied with the constitutional provisions for the presidency in their negotiations with Roh Tae-Woo on behalf of the ruling party (Yap 2019, 457). Despite the firm focus on the presidency, they nevertheless proceeded with the "easy" option of a one-term limit to account for Korea's autocratic past, instead of a more complex institutional dispersion of power with a non-imperial president facing more meaningful checks and balances.

Programmatic electoral competition between political parties has nonetheless emerged in defiance of path-dependence arguments grounded in the authoritarian era, and the progressive party has developed into a centre-left party that has become ideologically increasingly difficult to distinguish from its counterparts in European countries. Political parties have, in principle, shown responsiveness to popular demands, but Choi (2022) is right to expose Lee Myung-Bak and Park Geun-Hye as "lemon presidents", drawing on Akerlof's market for lemons in economics. They deceived the electorate and were unmasked as semi-democratic leaders whose rule relied on authoritarian means of government. Yoon Suk-Yeol joins the line-up of lemon presidents. Politically, deception and the failure to deliver on election promises are of too little consequence *for presidents* in the absence of any possibility of re-election. There is no meaningful accountability mechanism in place, except for voter punishment in general and regional elections. The divided government and lame ducks that emerge from voter punishment are hugely consequential for problem-solving capacity. It is appreciated that the proposal to strengthen the National Assembly and political parties could be argued to increase political immobilism. Opposition parties may only exploit stronger parliamentary rights to sabotage the executive, and the risk of divided government persists, highlighting an inherent fault line in any presidential system. However, the parallel enhancement of the National Assembly and a *non-imperial* executive (with the internationally conventional two-term limit, for example) offers the prospect of greater mediating and problem-solving capacity, notably through better institutionalised political parties and improved accountability. Moreover, it has been underlined that the Korean

electorate at large has remained broadly centrist, despite the political polarisation between the parties (Cheong and Haggard 2023). This, in conjunction with the public's fundamental expectation of delivery, provides, in principle, a political opportunity structure for *mediating* political parties and leadership in a more favourable institutional framework.

There are risks in any meaningful constitutional redesign. It is worth recalling in this context, however, that the rise of programmatic party competition was previously considered a remote prospect at best. Political parties have nonetheless shown unexpected responsiveness in the face of electoral competition, first prompted by Roh Moo-Hyun in the 2002 presidential election. Hence, there are grounds to attribute political parties the capacity to demonstrate responsiveness and develop more collaborative behaviours in a more conducive constitutional architecture. Countering the institutionalist argument for the recalibration of the relationship between the executive and legislature, one might contend that the abuse of office by leaders with an *undemocratic political culture* is the problem, not the constitutional design. And democratic advances under progressive governments serve as prima facie evidence (Mobrand 2023). As far as empirical observations are concerned, the argument of democratic progress under centre-left leadership and decline under conservative presidents is, of course, correct. Yet, such culturalist account of the democratic rollercoaster not only entails tautological properties but is also reminiscent of the controversy over gun crime in the United States: Republicans and the National Rifle Association contend that guns are not the problem in America's gun crime record, but only a few people who abuse their constitutional right of gun ownership and, thus, there is no reason for a constitutional amendment that restricts the right to gun ownership, they argue. Without denying that political culture needs to transform, too (arguably, more collaborative political behaviour would be a manifestation of a new *logic of appropriateness*; March and Olsen 1984), it is our institutionalist contention that a more collaborative and consensual political culture is an unlikely prospect without changing the constitutional basis for politics. A more robust political system with stronger political parties and renewed problem-solving capacity might also prove more resilient to pressures from the chaebol-dominated economy. Its reform is no less arduous, but this discussion needs to be left to a different article.

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