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Prologue



The modern history of Korea can be said to have begun in 1945 with the deeply emotional liberation from the Japanese colonial rule. A retrospective analysis reveals that the pattern of that history has assumed a distinctly dual character. On the one hand, the narrative has been scarred by the tragedy of national division, the brutality of civil war, and the widespread terror and suffocation of democracy inflicted by autocratic dictators and the institutions of a fascist state. This dark facets of Korea's

recent past may be summarized as 'a history of barbarism driven by insanity which witnessed countless sacrifices'. On the other hand, however, that history is also a proud testimony to the epic struggle by ordinary people in their determination to regain human dignity and replace oppression, exploitation, discrimination, and marginalization with true and universal democracy. As the narrative unfolded, major political crises were encountered at approximately ten-year intervals. Following the political breakthrough in 1987 the country entered a period of transition from dictatorship to democracy which, itself, also contained elements of tension and conflict at various societal levels.

The democratization in Korea was characterized by dynamic interactions between the state, political society, and social movements, but the fundamental force moving it forward was the pressure exerted from below. Both the initial inception and the continuing progress of democratization were possible only because of the presence of this powerful motive force. In

the sense that the attainment and maintenance of democracy requires rearrangement of the relationships between the state, political circles, and civil society, these imperatives were achieved in Korea by virtue of the momentum afforded by an irresistible dynamic.

A more systematic understanding of democracy requires one to consider the democratic transition of a country from a viewpoint beyond individual events, such as the change from an authoritarian or military regime to a civilian or elected government, and to look at democratization movements in terms broader than popular resistance against dictatorship or the



The masses who gathered together to commemorate the liberation.(1945, ©Lee Kyung-mo)

struggle for the institutional democratization of the state. By the same token, the history of democratization in Korea should be seen as a macro-historical process that unfolded subsequent to national liberation, was characterized by reciprocal dynamics, and in which a wider range of movements coexisted and interacted with each other for the attainment of 'socio-economic democracy', 'producer-oriented democracy', or 'democracy in the life-world'.

The Korean experience constitutes a veritable treasure house for theorization and inspiration for alternative perspectives on democracy; indeed, the democratization movement in Korea has attracted much attention from around the world for its resilience and militancy, and it has influenced similar movements in other countries. At a time of on-going transition, a need is also felt to reflect the significance of democratization in Korea in the context of the global history of democratization and, from that position, examine the alternatives for future progress.

This study will first consider the 'state-building' period of 1945~1953; i.e. from the moment of liberation from colonial rule to the signing of the armistice at the end of the Korean War, in the context of the consolidation of a cold war, division-defined, anti-communist system. It will then explain the course of democratization in the period immediately following; paying particular regard to the main actors and their objectives. The trajectory of democratization in Korea is, therefore, divided into three periods: the first of which extends from the commencement of the series of authoritarian dictatorships in the post-Korean War period to the 'Gwangju Democratic Uprising in 1980. The second period is from May 1980 to June 1987, the time of the 'June Struggle for Democracy', and the third is from June 1987 to the inauguration of President Roh Moo-hyun's administration in 2002.