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The Third Period of Democratization

A. Features of Democratic Transition

The political change in 1987 occurred in an environment where contradictions and tensions, stemming from both a repressive political system and the ramifications of capitalist development, had accumulated. Also, from a wider perspective, it was a time when socialist states were collapsing and the tide of neo-liberal globalization was rising. The events in 1987 were the precursors for changes in the modes of Korean politics and the regulation of social conflicts, as well as in the strategies of popular resistance. As the military retreated from power, the key concern of society shifted away from 'restoration of democracy' to 'democratic reform'.

There were several key features manifest in this period. First, Korea was transformed from an 'exceptional' developmental, dictatorial state into a 'normal' capitalist state, mediated by social and class struggles. As the space within which institutional politics and civil society functioned became more open and accessible, various forms of previously suppressed social antagonism concerning issues such as regionalism, the environment, the gender gap, and discrimination against minorities, began to emerge. Korean society became less inclined to give credence to cold war anti-communism; a fact evidenced by the inter-Korean summit in 2000 and the commencement of Geumgang Mountain tourism. Furthermore, the transition to democracy was placed in jeopardy, if not in actual retreat, as the logic of neo-liberal globalization was

uncritically introduced; causing some observers to describe the resultant clash as ‘economic liberalization promoted, social democratization delayed’.

On the other hand, the transition to democracy in Korea can also be characterized as a ‘reproduction of the ruling power through transformative reconfiguration of the ruling bloc’ in a process of ‘conservative democratization from the top’. The situation precluded existing institutional politics controlled by an authoritarian state from continuing. Therefore, the conservative ruling system had to undergo a transformative rearrangement in order to gain new political legitimacy and stability. In other words, on the one hand the democratic transition that had commenced in 1987 facilitated a dynamic burgeoning of movement politics, involving a broad social spectrum; while on the other, it sparked an institutional rationalization process in which the state attempted to restrain the radical or revolutionary components of the movement politics and selectively incorporate popular protests and radical movements into institutional politics. This socio-political process was one facet of the transformative rearrangement of the ruling system.

It is true that since the democratic transition began, the intensity of state repression decreased and the basic rights of citizens, in a liberal democratic sense, were expanded by ideologically liberal governments, each of which identified itself in terms such as ‘civilian government’, ‘government of the nation’, and ‘participatory government’. However, reforms undertaken up by these liberal-oriented governments lacked thoroughness, largely because they were promoted from top down, and were limited by macro conditions of a transitional era. The central problem was that the requisite scope of the rearrangement of existing power was not matched by the degrees of support and motivational impetus emanating from the predominantly conservative political representation; on the

contrary, the governments who proclaimed democratic credentials were, in practice, too generous in the compromises they struck with ‘status quo-oriented’ elements. The normalization of politics and the accommodation of pluralistic competition was repeatedly delayed, and the extant conservative political representation thrived in the resultant vacuum, fuelling region-based factionalism and socio-cultural regionalism in the process. In effect, the growth of democracy in Korea was suspended, and the establishment of a vicious cycle of crises of participation and crises of representation became inevitable. As long as the conservative-dominated party system remained intact, it manifested its discrepancies in proportion to the acceleration of class differentiation, restoration of progressive political forces, and rapid growth of civil society, including intensified social conflict. The political representation neither reflected adequately the new economic realities nor the new social and class divisions in society and, therefore, failed to mediate in the clash of competing interests or demands. In other words, it became obvious that political conservatism, sustained and fostered by the transformative rearrangement of state power, was causing ‘political lag’, and constituted a bottle-neck in the general developmental path of Korean society. The political system was increasingly seen as a cartel which excluded elements deserving of inclusion, and one that was patently incapable of effectively representing civil society.

B. Differentiation and Development of the Democratization Movement

In the third, previously suppressed, period of democratization various aspects of social activism increased as the ‘legal space’ expanded as a result of changes brought about by the June Struggle; at the same time, movements for political