



Korea, South — Va-PoReg Country Report

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[officially known as the Republic of Korea (ROK)]

09/07/1945 Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USA, Electoral Democracy]: On this date, the „United States Army Military Government in Korea” was established, serving as an interim government.

08/15/1948 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by USA, Electoral Democracy]/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date the Republic of Korea was established.¹ Under the leadership of Rhee, the country achieved independence. Rhee’s supporters won the legislative elections of 1948, with some significant political groups choosing to boycott the elections. The influence of the left-wing was considerably weakened by the U.S. occupation policy, resulting in the 1948 election being considered less competitive due to these factors (Savada 1994b, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 72). Suffrage for both men and women were given in 1948 right after the first constitutional law had been announced.² Rhee suppressed leftist opposition and his style of government became more autocratic over time.³ He accumulated more and more power in his hands. The parliamentary and presidential elections that followed in the 1950s were marred by widespread vote-buying, manipulation of electoral regulations, and fraud. While opposition parties retained their legal status and were permitted to participate in the elections, this hindered the ability of the opposition to garner substantial electoral backing (Croissant 2002a: 235). Public unrest began in 1960, when Rhee extended his rule without a vote and against the constitutional limit of two terms. Public interest shifted to the vice-presidential elections. These were manipulated to a considerable extent in Lee’s favor. Accusations of corruption arose as well. Protests against the corrupt regime grew and when a student was killed by the police during one it touched off a nation-wide movement which led to ousting the president (Kim 1968: 302-03, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 72).⁴ On 06/29/1960, South Korea held parliamentary elections, marking the sole instance of direct elections in the Second Republic. These elections were significant as they constituted the inaugural vote for the newly established House of Councillors, alongside the fifth election for the House of Representatives. Notably, they were the first national elections in the country that were relatively free and fair.⁵ The parliament then indirectly elected Yun Posun as president. An office that now had mainly ceremonial rights.⁶ While BMR, GWF and LIED classify the regime as democratic, PCR classifies the regime as autocratic, and MCM and RoW more specifically as an electoral/multiparty autocracy. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes the election as competitive. V-Dem’s EF&FI scores electoral freedom and fairness as ambiguous. Their CEI scores the election as not clean. Besides, political liberties were absent for the whole time (LIED). V-Dem’s PCLI considers them as somewhat present in 1960. In the beginning of this regime period the deficits in the institutional constraint on the executive became extremely evident. Afterwards, deficits in the electoral process continued to become evident. Therefore, we classify this period as an electoral autocracy. Until 1951, based on Polity5’s assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. From 1952 to 1959, according to Polity5, the executive’s constraints fell into Intermediate Category 1, between unlimited authority and slight limitations. In 1960, as per Polity5’s classification, the executive’s authority was on par with or below that of other branches, reflecting executive parity or subordination. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem’s JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were moderate from 1949-1957 and limited from 1958-1959. V-Dem’s LCE is classified by us as

indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were limited from 1949-1953 and absent from 1954-1959.

05/16/1961 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: Prolonged unrest and political deadlock between the president and prime minister led to a military coup led by Major General Park Chung-hee. Power from then on rested in a military junta called the Supreme Council for National Reconstruction, which was effectively led by Park, who took over as chairman after General Chang's arrest in July (Kim 1968: 289, 303, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 72).⁷ In the two years of military rule, the constitution was nullified, and the legislature along with political parties were banned. Numerous politicians faced purges, blacklisting, and silencing, while demonstrations were strictly prohibited (Kim 1975: 303). From the beginning the junta declared their transitional nature. First and foremost, the United States pressured the junta to return to a civilian rule (Kim 1975: 303-305). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. In addition to that, political liberties continued to be coded as absent according to LIED and can be interpreted as not really present per V-Dem's PCLI. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

10/15/1963 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral (Military) Autocracy: This date marks the end of the junta and the Establishment of the Third Republic. However, although the military junta was dissolved the personnel stayed the same. The military rulers retired from active service and assumed posts in the civilian government. Therefore, the Third Republic is often referred to as a mixed military-civilian system (Kim 1975: 302-308). In the presidential election held on this date Park Chung-hee, in the meantime retired from the military, was elected as president (Kim 1974: 131, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 72). LIED categorizes the elections as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as not really free, fair and clean. In 1969 a constitutional amendment was passed, which allowed Park Chung-hee to run for a third term.⁸ During the 1971 presidential elections, Park emerged victorious over Kim Dae-jung, the oppositional National Democratic Party (NDP) candidate, although this outcome was achieved through extensive fraudulent activities (Croissant 2002a: 236). Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Additionally, LIED scores concerning the political liberties remained absent (LIED) and V-Dem's PCLI points out that they did not really exist. Despite the strong military background of the leaders of the new civilian government and the coding of AF, BR, GWF and MCM as military autocracy, we classify this period as electoral autocracy. The reason for this is that there were multiparty presidential elections. Until 1971, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. In 1972, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations during this time. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

10/10/1972 End Electoral (Military) Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: On this date Park Chung-hee launched a self-coup known as the October Restoration.⁹ Park expanded his rule by introducing a new constitution that granted the president extensive authority, resembling almost dictatorial powers, and allowed him to seek an unlimited number of six-year terms.¹⁰ Despite facing ongoing popular unrest, students and democracy activists persisted in their protests calling for the elimination of the Yushin system. In response to these demonstrations, Park's government issued emergency decrees in 1974 and 1975, resulting in the imprisonment of numerous dissenters.¹¹ On 10/26/1979 Park Chung Hee was assassinated by the director of the KCIA, Kim Jae-gyu, thus bringing the 18-year military rule to an end. Prime Minister Choi Kyu-hah took the president's role.¹² This is not considered as a regime change since Choi as prime minister was not involved in the assassination and stood next in line for the presidency under Article 48 of the Yushin Constitution. Choi

was the sole candidate in an election on 12/06/1979 December for the balance of Park's term, becoming the country's fourth president.¹³ As classified by FH for this regime period, the country fluctuates between 10 and 11, scoring not free and partly free, which we interpret as moving between rather not free and not free. According to LIED only executive elections were held in 1972, from 1973 onward executive and legislative elections, which weren't multiparty were held. LIED still codes political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI indicates a not real presence. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

12/12/1979 End Military Autocracy/Start Military Autocracy: On this date Major General Chun Doo-hwan launched a coup d'état. Chun acting without authorization from Acting President Choi Kyu-hah, ordered the arrest of General Jeong Seung-hwa, ROK Army Chief of Staff, on allegations of involvement in the assassination of former President Park Chung-hee.¹⁴ In the following year, a vocal civil society, primarily composed of university students and labor unions, initiated powerful protests across the country to challenge authoritarian rule. Chun Doo-hwan responded by declaring martial law on 05/17/1980, which led to further escalation of the protests. On 05/18, a clash erupted in Gwangju between protesting students from Chonnam National University and the armed forces dispatched by the Martial Law Command. This incident evolved into a citywide protest that lasted for nine days until 07/27, known as the Gwangju massacre. In June 1980, Chun dissolved the National Assembly and established the National Defense Emergency Policy Committee, placing himself as a member. On 07/17, he resigned as the Director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) and remained solely as a committee member. In September 1980, President Choi Kyu-hah was compelled to resign, making way for Chun Doo-hwan to assume the role of the new military leader.¹⁵ On 08/27/1980, South Korea conducted indirect single-candidate presidential elections to fill the vacant position resulting from President Choi Kyu-hah's resignation. According to the 1972 Yushin Constitution, the president was elected by the National Conference for Unification, consisting of 2,540 members who were elected for a six-year term in December 1978. General Chun Doo-hwan emerged as the sole candidate and was elected unopposed.¹⁶ As classified by FH for this regime period, the country fluctuates between 9 and 11, scoring not free and partly free, which we interpret as moving between rather not free and not free. Besides, the state of political liberties is coded as absent by LIED and can be interpreted as not really present per V-Dem's PCLI. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive held unlimited authority with no institutionalized constraints on decision-making power. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

02/25/1981 End Military Autocracy/Start Electoral Autocracy: On this date, South Korea conducted two-stage presidential elections. On 02/11, an electoral college was elected, and subsequently, on 02/25, the president was elected by this electoral college. These were the final indirect presidential elections overseen by the government of Chun Doo-hwan under the newly implemented 1980 constitution, which now allowed opposition candidates to stand for election. Chun was re-elected with an overwhelming 90% of the vote from the electoral college.¹⁷ On 03/25/1981 not only presidential but also legislative elections were held. Chun's Democratic Justice Party won 151 out of 276 seats. The election was supposed to involve multiple parties, but many believe it was rigged. Alleged opposition candidates faced strict scrutiny by the Agency for National Security Planning and the South Korean Army Security Command. Important political leaders such as Kim Young-sam were prevented from participating in the election. Others were arrested. The Democratic Republican Party, led by the late president Park Chung-hee, was dissolved against its will.¹⁸ The fifth Republic of South Korea was established in 03/03/1981, when Chun was inaugurated.¹⁹ On 02/12/1985 legislative elections were held. The ruling Democratic Justice Party of President Chun won 148 of 276 seats. It

faced a tougher challenge from the united opposition. The New Korean Democratic Party (NKDP) was formed by former members of the New Democratic Party, notably opposition leaders Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam despite being still barred from running. The party made strong gains across the country, largely thanks to its focus on greater democratic rights.²⁰ Overall the fifth Republic was ruled autocratic by Chun and his Democratic Justice Party, albeit less harsh and with less power than Park. The elections were considered rigged and illegitimate.²¹ In June 1987, incumbent Vice President Roh Tae Woo announced a political reform that included direct election of the president. Subsequent negotiations between the regime and the opposition hammered out a constitutional compromise. The opposition's demand for constitutional changes, including direct presidential elections, was met by the military following widespread demonstrations. These changes paved the way for the transition to democracy (Haggard/Kaufman/Teo 2016: 59, Han 1988: 52, Billet 1990: 301, Geddes/Wright/Frantz 2014: 72). As classified by FH for this regime period, the country fluctuates between 9 and 11, scoring not free and partly free, which we interpret as moving between rather not free and not free. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED categorizes elections during this time as not competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as not really free, fair and clean. Furthermore, LIED's and V-Dem's PCLI scores regarding political liberties remained unchanged. Based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. During this regime period, V-Dem's JCE is classified by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were limited, whereas V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were absent.

12/16/1987 End Electoral Autocracy/Start Liberal Democracy: On this date presidential elections were held. The elections marked the establishment of the Sixth Republic and set an end to the years of authoritarian rule. Roh Tae-woo, representing the ruling Democratic Justice Party, won the elections, securing 37% of the total votes. Notably, the two prominent opposition candidates, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, collectively garnered more than 55% of the votes.²² We code this regime change event as a case of strategic democratic restructuring, as further democratization occurred despite the Democratic Justice Party's continued control of government. South Korea continued to have a presidential system of government with a unicameral legislature. Per FH's scoring between 1988 and 1993, the country is classified as free with a score of 5, which falls into our interpretation of the rather free category. From 1993 onwards the country is classified as free, scoring between 2 and 4, which we also place in the free category. Based on our observations, multiparty executive and legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. During this regime period LIED categorizes all elections as competitive. V-Dem's EF&FI and CEI score them as free, fair and clean. Civil liberties and political rights are generally upheld in this regime period, but struggles regarding minority rights, corruption and misogyny persist until today.²³ According to LIED full political liberties were achieved since 1997. Whereas V-Dem's PCLI already affirms their constant presence since 1989. According to Polity5, during this period, the executive's constraints fell into Intermediate Category 3, between substantial limitations and executive parity or subordination. For the majority of the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating comprehensive constraints on the executive. From 1988-1992 we interpret V-Dem's LCE as moderate and from 1993-1997 as robust. From 2013-2016 we interpret V-Dem's JCE as robust. In 2012, South Korea achieved a significant milestone as Park Geun-hye became the country's first female president, succeeding her father, former President Park Chung-hee. However, her administration faced serious allegations of corruption, bribery, and undue influence due to the involvement of her close friend Choi Soon-sil in state affairs. This led to massive public demonstrations starting from November 2016, ultimately resulting in her removal from office. Subsequently, new elections were held, which Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party won. Former president Park Geun-hye was convicted in April 2018 and sentenced to 24 years in prison due to charges of power abuse and corruption. In March 2022, Yoon Suk Yeol, representing the conservative opposition People Power Party, narrowly won the election against the Democratic Party candidate by the slimmest margin ever recorded.²⁴

12/03/2024 End Liberal Democracy/Start Electoral Democracy: On 12/03/2024 the president announced the imposition of martial law during a televised address based on the accusation that the Democratic Party would engage in anti-state activities. Six hours after the announcement the martial law was lifted and soon the martial law command was disbanded as well. Yoon Suk Yeol was impeached on 12/14/2024 and arrested on 01/15/2025. He is the first president in the history of South Korea who was arrested and indicted. The Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment and removal from office on 04/04/2025.²⁵ Presidential elections were held on 06/03/2025 and the former opposition leader Lee Jae Myung won. The voter turnout was 79,38% and therefore the highest since 1997.²⁶ The classification does not revert to Liberal Democracy because the martial law crisis revealed that core democratic guarantees were not effectively safeguarded. Even though institutions ultimately constrained the executive, the fact that the president could suspend civil liberties and constitutional order, even briefly, undermines the quality of liberal democracy. The impeachment and subsequent election restored constitutional procedures but did not immediately repair the erosion of institutional trust or ensure stronger safeguards against executive overreach. Therefore, the regime remains coded as Electoral Democracy until clear and sustained reforms demonstrate a full recovery of liberal-democratic standards. According to FH South Korea is classified as free, with a score of 4, which aligns with our classification as free.

Electoral Democracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Croissant 2002b, Croissant 2004, Domínguez 2002, Huang 1997)

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Liberation_Day_of_Korea

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Women%27s_suffrage

³ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syngman_Rhee#Presidency_\(1948%E2%80%931960\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Syngman_Rhee#Presidency_(1948%E2%80%931960))

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/March_1960_South_Korean_presidential_election

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1960_South_Korean_parliamentary_election

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_1960_South_Korean_presidential_election

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/May_16_coup

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Restoration

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fourth_Republic_of_Korea#Establishment

¹⁰ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea#Post-Korean_War_\(1960%E2%80%931990\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea#Post-Korean_War_(1960%E2%80%931990))

¹¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fourth_Republic_\(1972%E2%80%931979\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fourth_Republic_(1972%E2%80%931979))

¹² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fourth_Republic_\(1972%E2%80%931979\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fourth_Republic_(1972%E2%80%931979))

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choi_Kyu-hah

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coup_d%27%C3%A9tat_of_December_Twelfth

¹⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fifth_Republic_\(1979%E2%80%931987\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_South_Korea#Fifth_Republic_(1979%E2%80%931987))

¹⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1980_South_Korean_presidential_election

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_South_Korean_presidential_election

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1981_South_Korean_legislative_election

¹⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth_Republic_of_Korea

²⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1985_South_Korean_legislative_election

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifth_Republic_of_Korea

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1987_South_Korean_presidential_election

²³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/south-korea/freedom-world/2023>

²⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/South_Korea#Contemporary_South_Korea

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2024_South_Korean_martial_law_crisis

²⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_South_Korean_presidential_election

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