

Securitization of Democracy: A Case Study of South Korea*

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This study analyzes securitization of democracy in South Korea. While “North Korean threat” has dominated security discourse in South Korea, democracy has been securitized in the country. This study examines how democracy has been securitized in the political processes in South Korea. Therefore, the aims of this study are twofold. One is to examine the utility of securitization as a theoretical framework for empirical analysis, while the other is to explore the issue of securitization of democracy in the South Korean political context where threat from North Korea has always been a significant factor.

This study finds that the authoritarian leaders of South Korea before its democratic transition in 1987 like Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan were all engaged in the activities of securitizing democracy to justify their authoritarian rules. In other words, democracy was securitized by the authoritarian leaders who needed to justify their lack of legitimacy and to oppress the opposition party. Their assertion that facing the threat from the North, South Korea needed to be united around the authoritarian leaders effectively convinced the people to abandon the prospect for democracy. In other words, securitization of democracy is one of the best ways to understand and describe the politics of South Korea before its democratic reform in 1987.

Keywords: Securitization, Democracy, Security, South Korea, North Korea

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Introduction

With the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the post-Cold War era, international relations theorists started to ponder upon new ways of understanding and conceptualizing security issues. In this context, the theory of securitization, which was originally developed by the Copenhagen school, is considered as one of the newest and most innovative frameworks for analyzing contemporary security issues. At the same time, however, there are also some doubts about its usefulness for empirical analysis among pessimists. This study attempts to examine its usefulness as an empirical research by providing a case study utilizing the theoretical framework.

This study analyzes securitization of democracy in South Korea. While “North Korean threat” has dominated security discourse in South Korea, democracy has been the most securitized issue in the country. Some scholars argue that facing threat from North Korea, some particular political powers in South Korea, conventionally authoritarian leaders and the conservative camp, have promoted South Korea’s pro-U.S. and anti-North Korea identities to use it as a justification for their authoritarian regime and suppression of their political opponents. In this context, this study examines how democracy has been securitized in the political processes in South Korea. In so doing, this paper will review the burgeoning literature on securitization in South Korea, and then extend the discussion to the securitization process of democracy in the political process.

Therefore, the aims of this study are twofold. One is to examine the utility of securitization as a theoretical framework for empirical analysis, while the other is to explore the issue of securitization of democracy in the South Korean political context where threat from North Korea has always been a significant factor. The rest of the paper will consist of the followings: First, I will discuss and summarize the key points of the theory of securitization, focusing on its origin, main idea, and implications. A discussion of the current research on securitization in South Korea will follow. And then I will analyze securitization of democracy in the political process in South Korea. In

the conclusion section, I will summarize the key findings of this paper and discuss its implications both in theoretical and practical dimensions.

Securitization as a Framework for Analyzing Security

The so-called “Copenhagen school”¹ is well known for leading the discussion on security issues in the post-Cold War era and proposing a new way of conceptualizing the issue. Unlike the conventional security theories, they point out, in the post-Cold War era the concept of security should be expanded to include diverse actors such as individuals, sub-state groups, and even supranational actors domain beyond state actors’ arena. Furthermore, they also highlight that security issue is concerned with diverse areas including economic, societal, and domestic political issue areas, going beyond the pure military issues among state actors.² This new concept of security is created through the process of social discourse and consensus making, which is called “securitization.”³ This expanded concept of security occupies the central status in the discussion of security in the post-Cold War era.

According to the Copenhagen school, “security” is considered as an outcome of a specific social process rather than an objective condition. In this theory, the social construction of security issues is analyzed by examining the “securitizing speech acts” through which threats become represented and recognized. In other words, “issues become “securitized,” treated as security issues, through these speech-acts which do not simply describe an existing security condition, but bring it into being as a security situation by successfully representing

1. Its key texts include Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1991); Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, and Jaap de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

2. Barry Buzan, *Ibid.*, pp. 25-28.

3. Barry Buzan, et. al., *Ibid.*, pp. 23-33.

it as such."⁴

More specifically, one of the main characteristics of the Copenhagen school is the diversification of referent objects and the expansion of security sectors. When it comes to the diversification of referent objects, in the past especially during the Cold War era, state was considered as the single most important target for security. Yet in the post-Cold War era, the Copenhagen school views that sub-national entities including societal groups and individuals should also be considered in the concept of target for security. According to this perspective, state, which was considered as provider for security in the past, now can be regarded as a provider of "threat," as opposed to security. This negative function of state has become more prominent in the third world countries where the security of individuals and societal groups are *threatened* by the state. Not surprisingly, the concept of human security becomes a very important part of the thesis suggested by the school.

The expansion of security sectors suggests that not only military and strategic issues but also non-military sectors should also be considered for a new concept of security. In addition to military sector, Buzan takes four non-military sectors into consideration for conceptualizing security in a new world: politics, economy, society, and environment. As Ulman criticizes, being confined to military sector is an extremely narrow and biased way of defining security, which lacks other important issues that threaten the quality of life of social actors.⁵ In other words, they claim, in the contemporary world threats to political, economic, social, and environmental life are as equally important as threat to survival, which was conceived as the foremost value to be pursued by the traditional concept of security.

While diversification of referent objects and expansion of security sectors are among the most noticeable characteristics of the first generational of the Copenhagen school, it was still founded upon the

4. Michael Williams, "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics," *International Studies Quarterly* 47, no. 4 (2003), p. 513.

5. Richard H. Ulman, "Redefining Security," *International Security* 8, no. 1 (1983), pp. 133-134.

mainstream realist tradition in the sense that it accepts the idea that security refers to an *objective* condition. However, the recent modification of the theory highlights its turn to the constructivist tradition, which emphasizes the importance of inter-subjectivity and self-reflection. In the recently modified version of the theory, because security is conceived as an outcome of “speech-act,” whatever issue that is regarded as threat by the members of the society should be treated as a security issue. In other words, security refers to the behavior that people perceive thereat and problematize it within a society, rather than an *objective* condition.

In this way the concept of “securitization” has emerged as a new way of understanding the discourse on how and why some particular issues, especially non-security issues to the eyes of the traditional security advocates, become security-relevant issues.⁶ According to this perspective, because perception of threat is formed through discourse among members of a society, likewise security (or insecurity) is also created through discourse rather than given by objective condition. The concept of “securitization” makes it possible to treat security in a new perspective by emphasizing that in the post-Cold War era “threat” is selected and determined by “speech-act” by members of society instead of being given by *objective* condition.

In short, the new theory of securitization offers a new perspective in understanding security issues in the post-Cold War era by diversifying referent objects and expanding security sectors. In the process of securitization, certain issues that used to be considered non-security relevant are securitized through “speech-act” among the members of the society, especially policymakers or politicians. In other words, traditionally non-security issues such as environment, politics, economy, and societal issues, undergo transformation into security-relevant issues through the process of “securitization.”

6. Ole Waever, “Securitization and Desecuritization,” Ronnie D. Lipschutz, ed., *On Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

Literature Review: The Study of Securitization in South Korea

The study of securitization in South Korea is still in the initial stage. Most discussion on this topic is concerned about its theoretical perspectives, concentrating on its origin and implications. Not many empirical studies have investigated the process of securitization of non-security issues to date in South Korea, which indicates that most discussion in the security scholarship is limited to the traditional "national security" concept. This trend is understood by the security context that South Korea is still facing, represented by the presence of the actual threat by North Korea.

Among the few studies on securitization Min Byoung-won's theoretical discussion appears to be prominent.⁷ Min can be considered as the first scholar who introduced the new concept of "securitization" and discussed its importance in the study of security in the post Cold War era. Introducing the theory to the security scholarship in South Korea, he succinctly summarizes the key idea of the theory and discusses its implications in the post Cold War period.⁸ Especially, he expanded the theoretical discussion by providing critical evaluation of its strengths and weaknesses as a framework for empirical analysis. In the subsequent study he introduces a concept of a "new security dilemma" incorporating new types of threats in the post Cold War era.⁹ Especially in this study, he argues that in order to better understand the complexity of the current security environment, it is essential to understand its network characteristics because security environment in the contemporary world is moving in the direction of greater uncertainty and complexity due to increasing interactions and networks among actors. Namely, Min's discussions opened the door for

7. Min Byoung-Won, "The Expansion of the Security Concept in the Post Cold War Era: the Copenhagen School, Securitization, and International Relations Theory," (in Korean) *World Politics* 5, no. 1 (2006), pp. 4-61; Min Byoung-Won, "The New Security Dilemma in Networked International Politics: A Theoretical Analysis," (in Korean) *Peace Studies* 20, no. 1 (2012), pp. 31-69.

8. Min, "The Expansion of the Security Concept."

9. Min, "The New Security Dilemma in Networked International Relations."

a new trend of study in the area of securitization in South Korea.

While the securitization studies are still in the initial stage, there are increasing efforts in the study of human security, which indicates that there is a good potential for future research in the study of securitization.¹⁰ Yet it should be noted that most studies in human security are also focused on the discussion on its theoretical dimension. Matsukuma and Park investigate the relations between human security and economic sanctions by analyzing the humanitarian exemptions of sanctions and the right to minimum substances as a basic need.¹¹ In the conclusion they recommend the UN Security Council to make references to the concept of human security to improve the legitimacy of sanction regimes although they acknowledge that the concept of human security has not yet been regarded as a legal principle. Lee discusses human security in the context of East Asia. In particular, she explores the progresses and setbacks in resolving East Asian human security issues by identifying major problems in the region, as well as the specific threats facing individual countries in the region. She advocates the UN and international community intervention to promote human security in this area.¹² Another theoretical discussion in human security can be found in Bernaldez, who argues that human security should be the main focus of global governance. Like Lee, he discusses human security in the East Asian context, evaluating each country's efforts to promote human security. As to South Korea, he asserts, human security were main focus of the governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun governments but changed course when the Lee Myung-bak government was inaugurated.¹³ Hwang

10. Securitization related studies and human security related studies have a lot in common in the sense that both of them are considered as main issues of non-traditional security studies, and therefore, they will be treated as such in this paper.

11. Jun Matsukuma and Park Bae-Keun, "Human Security and Economic Sanctions," (in Korean) *Legal Studies* 51, no. 1 (2010), pp. 357-394.

12. Shin-wha Lee, "Human Security in East Asia," *Korean Political Science Review* 37, no. 4 (2003), pp. 317-342.

13. Pedro B. Bernaldez, "Human Security in Global Governance," *Oughtopia* 26, no. 2 (2011), pp. 5-31.

discusses human security in the Southern African context. In particular, he explores whether or not and to what extent human security can be applied to analyze politics in the Southern Africa. He finds that state centric discourse has dominated the security related studies in this area even in the post-Cold War era. He concludes that multi-layered and more comprehensive analysis is necessary in understanding human security issues in this area.¹⁴

A pessimistic perspective as to studies on human security is also observed. While investigating the impact of human security on international relations theories, Kang evaluates that the current research on human security has not reached the point of a paradigmatic shift on the theorization of international relations. Although UN's advocacy of human security has taken root in the academic field in international studies, he argues, human security is an over-stretched concept of security. He concludes that there is still long way to go for human security to take a central status in the study of international relations.¹⁵

The examination of previous studies reveals that the study on securitization in South Korea is still in the initial state. Few studies have been involved in the empirical investigation of securitization issues in South Korea. Instead, some meaningful studies have been conducted as to the development and refinement of its theoretical perspective. What is noteworthy is that more research efforts have been devoted to the study of human security, which is a positive indication for the future research potential for securitization. However, there is also similar limitation in the study of human security, which is that many of the studies deals with its theoretical perspective rather than being involved in the empirical analysis.

14. Kyu-Deug Hwang, "Linking Human Security and Regionalism in Southern Africa: Some Conceptual Approach," (in Korean) *African Studies* 20 (2006), pp. 155-180.

15. Sung-Hack, Kang, "The Impact of Human Security upon Theories of International Relations," (in Korean) *Peace Studies* 16, no. 1 (2008), pp. 170-205.

Securitization of Democracy in South Korea

As a way to fill the vacuum in the previous studies, this study attempts to offer an empirical analysis on securitization in the South Korean context. More specifically, this study analyzes the authoritarian rulings before democratization of South Korea from the securitization perspective. In this analysis my argument is that democracy was securitized by the authoritarian leaders to justify their lack of legitimacy in the political process and it successfully worked until the threat from North Korea became was not perceived as “real threat.”¹⁶

The Democratic Reform of South Korea

On June 29, 1987, Roh Tae-woo, the presidential candidate of the ruling Democratic Justice Party in South Korea declared an eight-point democratization package. This historic event, known as the “June 29 Declaration,” is considered to be the first step in South Korea’s democratic development effort since then. Following the June 29 Declaration, the National Assembly drafted and approved a new constitutional framework on October 12, 1987, which was ratified sixteen days later by 93 percent of the votes. Moreover, a variety of further reforms were adopted during the subsequent Roh Tae-woo administration to protect political rights and civil liberties of individuals and associations. Some examples of these reforms included the enactment of the Constitutional Court, the abolishment of the Basic Press Act and a comprehensive and sophisticated system of press censorship. In addition, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), which served the past authoritarian regimes by monitoring oppositional politicians and dissident movement, pledged to discontinue its anti-

16. Explaining the democratic development of South Korea with reference to its security environment is not totally new. For example, Suh’s work can be understood in this context. Please see Suh Jae Jean, “Bound to Last? The U.S.-Korea Alliance and Analytical Eclecticism,” in Suh Jae Jean, Peter J. Katzenstein, and Allen Carlson eds., *Security in East Asia: Identity, Power, and Efficiency* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) for more details.

democratic operations.

The politics of South Korea before the democratic reform can be characterized by the securitization of democracy by the authoritarian leaders who had to legitimize their dictatorship. I will present a brief history of the contemporary politics of South Korea before its democratization in 1987, focusing on describing how the security situation were utilized by the authoritarian leaders for the purpose of strengthening their rule, in other words, how democracy was securitized.

The Korean War and the Rhee Syngman Administration

In 1948, Rhee Syngman was elected as the first president of newly independent South Korea. In less than two years of his inauguration, the Korean War erupted with a full-scale invasion by Northern forces on June 25, 1950. The war had lasted for over three years until armistice was signed by the U.S., China, and North Korea in July 1953. It is suggested that the war had forced sacrifices of over one million civilian lives and USD 3 billion for both North and South Korea. The war turned the Korean peninsula into a social and economic ruin literally.

In addition to the social and economic impacts, the war brought significant political consequences as well, such as strengthening the autocracy of the Rhee administration. President Rhee took advantage of the unstable security environment associated with the war to extend his tenure as long as possible. An expert evaluates that "Rhee became absolutely powerful, his regime turned into a corrupt and arrogant clique that remained aloof from the people, whose lives had hardly improved during Rhee's twelve year rule."¹⁷ In other words, Rhee was able to establish a strong autocratic regime, taking advantage of the national crisis with the communist North Korea. The Rhee government unceasingly infused the people with fear of a second war, and thus, the necessity of a powerful, united government. Those who had already experienced the devastating impact of war easily

17. John K. Oh, *Korean Politics: The Quest for Democratization and Economic Development* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 40.

succumbed to Rhee's persuasion. "Eradication of Communism" and "Reunification of the Koreans by Marching North" were the two most powerful slogans of the Rhee government. Furthermore, in December 1958, a new, strengthened National Security Law was passed in the name of investigating pro-communist activities. However, this law served only to suppress the oppositional party and control anti-government press. Another critical anti-communist measure by the Rhee administration was to execute Cho Bong-am, the head of the Progressive Party. The charge brought against Cho and the Progressive Party were collusion with North Korea and the undermining of national security. However, the Rhee government was not able to maintain the success previously achieved in the early 1950s anymore. In spite of the harsh anti-communist measures, anti-regime protests rapidly spread across the country and the autocratic Rhee administration was finally overthrown.

The "April 19 Student Uprising" and the Democratic Second Republic

The formidable Rhee administration was overthrown by the "April 19 Student Uprising" in 1960. In response to Rhee's fraudulent reelection efforts, on April 19, more than three thousand college students surged into the streets of Seoul, South Korea, demanding the resignation of President Rhee. This initial student uprising stimulated severe resentment among the general populace, who later joined in the demonstrations. Not surprisingly, the Rhee government declared martial law and heavily armed forces were brought into Seoul to quell the uprising. Rhee again attempted to employ the security rationale, blaming the uprising as an attempt by the communist North Korea to disrupt peaceful society in South Korea. Yet, the hostility of the people was too overwhelming to be appeased by security rhetoric. Rhee finally resigned on the evening of April 26, 1960 and the Second Republic of South Korea followed the sudden fall of the First Republic.

The April 19 Student Uprising was the first movement towards democratization from the populace in the political history of South

Korea. The succeeding Second Republic abandoned the presidential system of government and adopted an elaborate parliamentary system. The initial constitution was drastically amended in June 1960 to accommodate more democratic measures. The national assembly was changed to a bicameral institution with a newly established political office — Prime Minister. The Prime Minister was to be appointed by the President and confirmed by the lower house. This new office was expected to balance the power of the President. Furthermore, the new constitution significantly expanded the political rights of the people, stating “the people’s press and publications freedom and the freedom of assembly and associations will not be restricted.”

The only problem concerning the Second Republic was that it had little capacity to appropriately manage political, social and economic issues, contrary to the high expectations of the people following the April 19 Uprising. The newly established democratic government failed to channel adequately diverse demand from various sectors of the country and was unable to stabilize political processes. As with many cases of premature democracy, participatory politics ultimately led to the inflation of demands and resulted in destructive freedom during the Second Republic of South Korea.¹⁸ The short-lived democratic Second Republic was finally overthrown by a military coup led by Major General Park Chung-hee, who later became the third President of South Korea.

The First Military Coup (“The May 16 Coup”) and the Park Chung-hee Administration

The Park Chung-hee administration, which was initially founded upon a military coup, quickly attempted to compensate for its illegitimate power through economic success. Indeed, with an annual per capita income was as little as USD 82 in 1962, South Korea as facing severe poverty. Once again, the military coup, with its emphasis on economic

18. Yearn H. Choi, “Failure of Democracy in Legislative Process,” *World Affairs* 140, no. 4 (1978), pp. 331-340.

success, easily gained popular approval. Park¹⁹ started the state-led industrialization project with the slogan of “liberation from poverty.” Thanks to the successful take-off, South Korea achieved remarkable economic growth during Park’s tenure, and earned its name as one of the four “Asian Tigers.”

Park’s undeniable economic achievement did not come without cost. Civil liberties, which had been restored during the Second Republic, were severely restricted throughout his tenure. The military junta, which executed the coup, repeatedly arrested journalists on charges of publishing “false information” and/or writing stories “detrimental to the national security.”²⁰ In particular, the Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA), the body supposedly responsible for national security, served as a key instrument in manipulating domestic politics and keeping surveillance over all important aspects of Korean life.

Park’s obsession with power brought another constitutional amendment and, eventually, the Fourth Republic in 1972. During his reign, presidential term limitations were removed and a new constitution was adopted which afforded President Park a blanket of power. Despite Park’s now obvious ploy for power, the official reason for his new constitution was to emphasize unity facing threat from North Korea, in his words, “in order to consolidate national unity, to coalesce national opinion and to enable all people to prepare themselves thoroughly for an impregnable posture of national security.”²¹ In a word, President Park took advantage of the external security environment to justify the strengthening of his dictatorship. In January 1968, South Koreans were unsettled when 31 militants from North

19. Not to be confused with the current President Park Geun-hye. The paper only refers to the former President Park Chung-hee when using the term “President Park.”

20. Robert A. Scalapino, “Korea: Politics of Change,” *Asian Survey* 3, no. 1 (1962), p. 32.

21. Special Statement by President Park Chung-hee on the Occasion of Promulgation of the Presidential Emergency Measures for Safeguarding National Security and Public Order, April 29, 1975. See Oh (1999), pp. 48-60.

Korea nearly succeeded in assassinating President Park. Three days later, the U.S. ship *Pueblo* was seized by North Korea, charging that the ship intruded its territorial waters with hostile military intentions. Furthermore, incessant infiltrations by the armed agencies of the North and frequent military collisions near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) strengthened the perception of a security threat among the people of South Korea.

The role of U.S. foreign policy in the 1970s also played a key role in the process. In 1977, United States President Jimmy Carter decided to withdraw American troops from South Korea. This new policy appears to have intensified the perceptions of a security threat in the minds of South Korean people. According to a poll in 1977, 64.8 percent of those interviewed stated that their greatest concern was the withdrawal of American troops, followed by inflation (44.4%), children's education (25.7%), and taxes (22.9%).²² The projected withdrawal of the U.S. troops was especially disturbing to the South Korean people because the arms race between the two Koreas, at that time, evaluated to favor the North.

In sum, the authoritarian regime under President Park was the result of his obsession with the presidency and the uncertain international security milieu surrounding the Korean peninsula. Park took full advantage of the unstable security environment and successfully convinced the vulnerable people of South Korea to accept his autocratic rule. The interplay of these forces ultimately culminated in the politically repressive regime in South Korea.

The Second Military Coup ("The December 12 Coup") and the Chun Doo-hwan Administration

The dictatorial rule of President Park came to an end when he was shot and killed by his subordinate in October 1979. This sudden collapse of the Fourth Republic brought another chance for democratization in South Korea. There arose a strong desire among the people of South

22. "Social Perception Survey," (in Korean) *Joongang Ilbo*, September 23, 1977.

Korea for a return to democratic government. Immediately following the assassination of President Park, a survey indicated that the majority of the people (approximately 73% of those interviewed) clearly expressed their preference for wide political reforms and the institutions of democratic government. In particular, respondents favored a direct popular election of the President, enhanced authority for legislative and judiciary bodies to provide checks and balances of presidential power and a system of local autonomy.²³

Despite the rising desire for democratic rule, all hope of such a government evaporated when the second military coup, led by Major General Chun Doo-hwan, took place on December 12 in 1979 (the so-called "December 12 Coup"). With the successful coup, General Chun quickly seized power and suppressed numerous attempts at opposition with brute military force. The Gwangju Massacre in May 1980, in which armed soldiers opened fire at thousands of unarmed demonstrators, was a most alarming signal that Chun had established a "new military regime." He was elected president by the National Conference of Unification in August 1980, replacing acting president Choi Kyu-hah.

It is widely accepted that the Fifth Republic, headed by Chun, was one of the harshest authoritarian regimes in contemporary Korean history. The greater protection of human rights established in the constitution of the Fifth were rendered nearly completely ineffective by a series of laws passed under the newly appointed Legislative Council for National Security. For example, "the Press Act" passed on December 26, 1980 effectively abolished freedom of the press, while "Basic Labor Act" passed on December 30, 1980 drastically curtailed workers' rights. Furthermore, torture and other excessive means of force were common practice in questioning of those thought to pose a threat to the government. Ultimately, the judicial system functioned

23. "The National Assembly should Lead the Amendment of the Constitution," (in Korean) *Dong-A Ilbo*, December 25, 1979; "Koreans Hope for Mental Satisfaction Rather than Material Affluence," (in Korean) *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 3, 1980; "Koreans Perception on the 1980s Outlook," (in Korean) *Dong-A Ilbo*, January 7, 1980.

to strengthen the authoritarian regime as opposed to enhancing democratic development.

As did his predecessors, President Chun justified his tight control of political activity and repression of dissent in the name of national security. The “Gwangju Uprising,” an attempted democratic revolution, was characterized by the Chun government as a “turmoil engineered by dangerous revolutionaries sympathetic to the communist northern puppets.”²⁴ Similarly, all movements toward democratization were quickly suppressed in the name of national security.

The national security rationale employed by the Chun regime was strengthened in part by a series of international instances surrounding the Korean peninsula at the time. In early September 1983 Korean Airline flight 007, on its way from Anchorage to Seoul, was shot down by a Soviet Jet Fighter near Sakhalin. All 269 persons aboard the aircraft were killed. Then, only one month later, during President Chun’s 18-day, six nation trip abroad in October 1983, a powerful bomb exploded in the Martyr’s Mausoleum in Rangoon, Burma. President Chun and his wife were scheduled to visit the Mausoleum for a wreath-laying ceremony and only narrowly escaped this attempted assassination. While President Chun himself escaped, many of his staff, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and the Presidential Secretary General, died in the attack. The South Korean armed forces and the U.S. troops stationed in South Korea were placed on full alert. The Burmese government ultimately concluded that the terrorist attack was executed by the North Korean army — further aggravating the already elevated military tension between the two Koreas.

Unlike the early years of President Chun’s regime, some important changes were being made as he approached the end of his 7-year term. The demand for democratization among civil society was growing, and the middle class was beginning to emerge as a significant social force. Most importantly, inter-Korean relations and East-West confrontation was beginning to change. This combination of

24. Oh, *Korean Politics*, p. 83.

factors opened for the doors for democratization to be realized in South Korea.

The Crucial Scenes: Securitization of Democracy

From the examination of the political history before democratization, it is clear that democracy had been consistently securitized by the authoritarian leaders in South Korea. Rhee, followed by Park and Chun, frequently took advantage of 'threats to national security' to legitimize their dictatorial regimes and to suppress domestic opposition. The South Korean elite exploited the threats from the North to justify a strong military presence and martial law, stating that these measures were necessary to maintain national security and social order. The undemocratic leadership in South Korea received only limited protestation from the U.S., which had significant interest in political stability on the Korean peninsula during the Cold War.

The "April 19 Student Uprising," and "First Military Coup" of the late 1950s and early 1960s was a critical moment for democratization in South Korea. The Rhee administration, which was seriously threatened by decreasing electoral popularity, resorted to a series of anticommunist measures for the purpose of enhancing unity and support amongst the people. In December 1958, a new strengthened National Security Law was passed in the name of investigating pro-communist activities. However, this law served only to suppress the oppositional party and control antigovernment press. In May 1959, the government also ordered the shutdown of one of the major newspapers in Korea, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, which was highly critical of the Rhee administration throughout the 1950s. The closing of this media source was deemed an act to enhance national security. Another critical anti-communist measure by the Rhee administration was to execute Cho Bong-am, the head of the Progressive Party. The charge brought against Cho and the Progressive Party were collusion with North Korea and the undermining of national security. However, the anti-communist measures by the Rhee regime failed to garner the

success previously achieved in the early 1950s. In spite of the harsh anti-communist measures, anti-regime protests rapidly spread across the country and the autocratic Rhee administrations was finally overthrown.

However, the sudden democratic transition was unable to survive the military coup and the democratic Second Republic was only short-lived. The new administration led by Park Chung-hee was also authoritarian in nature just like the Rhee regime. Park employed a set of institutional mechanisms to repress the expansion of anti-government groups in the name of strengthening national security. The powerful Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) was very effective in controlling the opposition by student groups and labor unions. Also, the anti-communist law and national security law were strengthened to allow severe punishment of anti-government movement for causing social unrest and undermining national security. The climax of Park's autocratic rule was his proclamation of an emergency decree called *October Yushin* (literally meaning "renewal") in 1972, in which the National Assembly was dissolved and replaced by an emergency cabinet, all political activities were prohibited, and the constitution was amended, to strengthen Park's rule. There is no denying that the KCIA, the Anti-communist Law, and the National Security Act were his major instruments in sustaining his dictatorship. In a word, his anti-communism campaign was as effective as the early 1950s in suppressing the opposition, as he was successful in converting economic growth into political popularity.

The second critical moment of democratization in South Korea was the period from the late 1970s to the early 1980 when the authoritarian system of *Yushin* collapsed. With the assassination of President Park in 1979, Chun Doo-hwan took power through the second military coup. Many Korean expected that Park's death would bring full democracy in South Korea. However, contrary to the expectation of many Koreans, authoritarian rule on the southern half of the Korean peninsula was extended through Chun's oppression of the national wide opposition, which included the "Gwangju Uprising." After taking power, Chun resorted to diverse anti-communist and national security campaign to silence opposition, just as his predecessors had.

In short, South Korea was unable to achieve solid democratization during these two critical moments. The first democratizing attempt represented by the “April 19 Student Uprising” was initially successful, yet later failed when the democratic Second Republic was immediately toppled by the first military coup. Likewise, the second chance for democratic development was squelched by Chun Doo-hwan’s succession following the second military coup. The resulting autocratic regimes had undoubtedly taken advantage of the security rationale to justify their autocratic rule. The security rationale was a very successful strategy for each autocratic regime, because the people of South Korea were living in a volatile international environment. Although South Korea began to exceed the North Korean economic capability during the late 1970s, North Korea continued to pose a significant threat throughout the 1970s and beyond. Assessments of both North and South Korea’s military power suggested some balance between the two countries in the late 1970s.²⁵ In fact, North Korea was found to dominate South Korea in terms of military power and economic capability well into the 1970s. Therefore, given the less stable economy and less powerful military, South Korea was exposed to considerable external threat throughout this period. Even if war seemed unlikely, the North Korean capability to initiate subversive operation created enough external threat for South Korean people to allow autocratic forms of government.

The international security environment of the period also intensified South Korea’s external threat perception. Especially, the U.S. troops withdrawal plan announced by the Carter administration sig-

25. According to the comprehensive assessment of the military balance between the two Koreas published by the Congressional Budget Office in May 1978, North Korea had advantage in such areas as numbers of tank, artillery pieces, air defense system, number of tactical aircraft, and unconventional warfare forces, while South Korea was given the advantage in the areas like ground force manpower, technical capability, and defense positions on advantageous terrain. However, overall they were assessed quite even in military capability. See The US Congressional Budget Office, *Force Planning and Budgetary Implications of US Withdrawal from Korea*. Washington D.C., 1978.

nificantly strengthened the external perception of the South Korean people in the late 1970s. As mentioned earlier, a national poll performed in 1979 indicated that the withdrawal of the U.S. troops was the primary national concern to them. Although the plan was not implemented as announced, its discussion itself was serious enough to stimulate security concern among the people of South Korea, especially given the lack of superiority of the South over the North in military capability.

In sum, the political history of democratization in South Korea can be characterized as securitization of democracy. The examination of the two critical moments reveals that security issues hindered smooth democratization of the country. The unstable security condition was fully exploited by the succession of autocratic leaders in South Korea. High external threat perception, brought on by the Korean War and an unstable environment of international and regional security, allowed each of these regimes the opportunity to increase in power and authoritarian rule.

Conclusion

This paper explored the securitization of democracy in the modern politics of South Korea. In so doing, I also discussed the key idea of the new theoretical framework and examined the current state of the research on securitization in South Korea. Finding a hole in the current research, which is lack of empirical analyses, this study aims to offer a useful case study on the securitization of democracy.

This study finds that the authoritarian leaders of South Korea before its democratic transition in 1987 like Rhee Syngman, Park Chung-hee, and Chun Doo-hwan were all engaged in the activities of securitizing democracy to justify their authoritarian rules. In other words, democracy was securitized by the authoritarian leaders who needed to justify their lack of legitimacy and to oppress the oppositional party. Their assertion that facing the threat from the North South Korea needed to be united around the authoritarian leaders

effectively convinced the people to abandon the prospect for democracy. In a nutshell, securitization of democracy is one of the best ways to understand and describe the politics of South Korea before its democratic reform in 1987.

However, the strategy of securitizing democracy did not work anymore since the late 1980s because the threat from the North was not perceived as a real threat to the people in South Korea. South Korea began to predominate the North in terms of both economic and military capabilities since then. Therefore, while the securitization of democracy framework was a useful framework for understanding the modern politics of South Korea during the authoritarian rulings before 1987, it is not a very relevant analytical tool to explain the current politics of the country any longer.

This study originally intended to fill a hole in the current research on securitization by providing an empirical analysis. Therefore, the contribution by the study in the theoretical dimension will be confined to that extent. In other words, this study is believed to make a significant contribution to the current research by offering a case study that shows securitization is a useful framework to analyze domestic political outcome. When it comes to the practical implication, this study suggests from the analysis of South Korean case that when the threat is not perceived as a real threat by the people, securitization of democracy does not work to justify authoritarian rules.

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