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## Introduction

### *Reexamining South Korea's Democratization*

On June 10, 1987, after almost three decades of repressive authoritarian rule, protestors poured into the streets of cities all over South Korea, shouting “Abolish the evil Constitution!” and “Down with dictatorship!” In addition to widespread street rallies held by student protestors and opposition politicians in Seoul, the capital city and often the center of such protests, mass demonstrations were held in cities such as Taejŏn, Pup’yŏng, Sŏngnam, and Kunsan, where such events had not been observed before. Altogether, approximately 240,000 people from 22 cities participated in mass demonstrations against the dictatorship on that day, thus marking the beginning of the “June Democratic Uprising.”

Demonstrations continued to grow with each passing day: on June 15, students held them at 59 universities; on June 16, at 65 universities; and on June 17, at 70 universities. On June 18, approximately 1.5 million people in 16 cities, including Seoul, Pusan, Mokp’o, Sunch’ŏn, Chŏnju, Wŏnju, and Ch’unch’ŏn, participated in mass rallies to ban tear gas, which the police had been using to suppress the protests. On June 26, the “Great Peaceful March of the People for the Achievement of a Democratic Constitution” was held in 33 cities, and approximately 1.8 million people across the country agitated for “Direct election of the president!” Finally, on June 29, 1987, after almost three weeks of sustained mass protest, the ruling party announced the “June 29 Declaration.” This eight-point democratization package included a promise to hold direct presidential elections and brought a dramatic end to the authoritarian era.

The nationwide protests throughout that month revealed not only South Koreans' widespread discontent but also their latent capacity to mobilize. For most of the preceding three decades, the authoritarian regimes had proven to be resilient—they had used coercion to quell dissent and successfully claimed political legitimacy based on the extraordinary economic development they achieved. The first military dictator, Park Chung Hee, had been credited with lifting the country out of poverty and bringing about economic growth so dramatic that it is known as the “Miracle on the Han River.” His strong economic record, along with his use of repressive measures, had allowed him not only to maintain his grip on power but also to extend his rule by amending the constitution in 1967 and installing a new Yusin (revitalization) constitution in 1972, which transformed his presidency into a legal dictatorship. The second dictator, Chun Doo Hwan, had managed to get away with a bloody massacre in 1980, deliver economic growth amid the second global oil crisis, and successfully consolidate his new, coup-born regime. Although antiauthoritarian struggles by dissident intellectuals, religious leaders, students, and laborers had existed throughout the authoritarian period, none had ever reached the scale of the June 1987 protests or included so many ordinary citizens, including white-collar workers. Given the seeming durability and invincibility of those regimes, what could explain the explosion of antigovernment sentiment and, ultimately, the end of authoritarian rule?

This book answers that question by examining the long-term trajectory of South Korea's democratic transition and the contentious politics surrounding the process. It shows that although economic growth initially increased popular support for and thereby stabilized the authoritarian regimes, the autocrats' industrial and educational policies also contributed to the organization of social forces—and those forces facilitated the nationwide pro-democracy protests that ultimately brought about the democratic transition. Despite claims made in the existing literature, the country's democratization was not solely “from below” (i.e., through popular pressure, such as that generated by various social movements) or solely “from above” (i.e., due to policy changes coming from the incumbent elites)—rather, it resulted from a combination of the two. And, for this reason, this book argues that authoritarian development *itself* was a hidden root cause of democratic development in South Korea.

What We Know—and Do Not Know—  
about South Korea's Democratization

*South Korea: A Model Case of Modernization Theory?*

Political scientists have long sought to explain why and how countries become democracies, and they have identified several key determinants of such transitions: economic development (e.g., Lipset 1959) and income inequality (e.g., Boix 2003; Acemoglu and Robinson 2006), culture (e.g., Almond and Verba 1963; Inglehart and Welzel 2005) and cultural heritage (Bernhard, Reenock, and Nordstrom 2004), institutional (state) capacity (Fukuyama 2014; Huntington 1968), social capital and civil society (e.g., Putnam 1994), natural resources (e.g., Dunning 2008; Ross 2012), waves of democracy (Huntington 1991), and linkages with Western democracies (Levitsky and Way 2005). Of these determinants, the first—economic development—has received the greatest share of attention. As Seymour Martin Lipset puts it, “All the various aspects of economic development—industrialization, urbanization, wealth and education—are so closely inter-related as to form one major factor which has the political correlate of democracy” (Lipset 1963, 41). This conception is reflected in Lipset’s modernization theory, which asserts that the more economically developed a nation is, the greater the chance that it will develop into a democracy (Lipset 1959). Indeed, as the theory predicts, many large-*n* studies in comparative politics have identified a positive relationship between per capita income (a commonly used measure of a population’s standard of living and quality of life) and levels of democracy (e.g., Barro 1990; Boix and Stokes 2003; Bollen 1979; Burkhart and Lewis-Beck 1994; Epstein et al. 2006; Jackman 1973; Londregan and Poole 1990).<sup>1</sup>

South Korea (hereafter Korea) is one of the countries that conforms to this correlation between income and democracy. Known as one of the “East Asian Tigers” (i.e., newly industrializing countries in East Asia that achieved economic growth and industrialization between the 1960s and the 1980s), Korea is regarded as one of the most successful cases of “third wave democratization” (Huntington 1991) in the late twentieth century. It is one of the “dream cases of a modernization theorist” because it “developed under a dictatorship, became wealthy, and threw dictatorship off” (Przeworski and Limongi 1997, 162). Indeed, a vast literature on Korea’s economic development and political development depicts a relatively smooth and peaceful capitalist transition toward modernity that brought about the expansion of the middle class and civil society—and, eventually, democracy.

What has happened there since democratization seems to support this label, too. First, Korea has continued to thrive economically since becoming a democracy; despite the effects of the 1997–98 Asian Financial Crisis, the country made a quick recovery and grew to be the tenth largest economy in the world. Additionally, although some scholars have argued that it is showing signs of democratic decline (e.g., J.-J. Choi 2012; Haggard and You 2015; W. Kang and Kang 2014; G.-W. Shin 2020), Korea passed Samuel Huntington’s (1991) “two turnover test” when the 2007 presidential election marked the second peaceful transfer of power to the former opposition in the country’s electoral history.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, the 2016–17 “Candlelight Revolution” led to the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye, who was found to be corrupt, unjust, and undemocratic. The international community praised this movement for showing the world “how democracy is done” (e.g., Caryl 2017; Tharoor 2017).

Despite the ways in which Korea seems to be a perfect case of modernization theory, however, the empirical facts deviate from the standard, broad-strokes narrative of Korea’s economic and political development, revealing instead a country on a bumpier path to democracy. The First Republic, led by Syngman Rhee at the establishment of the Republic of Korea in 1948, became increasingly authoritarian and was overturned by the April Revolution in 1960. A parliamentary regime emerged but ended abruptly on May 16, 1960, when General Park Chung Hee carried out a military coup. Under Park’s military dictatorship (1961–79) and then Chun Doo Hwan’s (1980–88), the political system did not (as predicted by modernization theory) become increasingly democratic as the national economy grew—it instead became increasingly authoritarian. Party-based politics and representative government were restored in 1963, but in 1972 Park drastically increased executive power and effectively converted his own presidency into a legal dictatorship (H. B. Im 2011). In 1980, the incumbent regime was replaced by Chun’s autocratic rule, which maintained and even increased the prior regime’s level of repression (Hellmann 2018, 74). Figure 1.1, which graphs these joint dynamics of democracy and development over time, makes clear that Korea’s transition dynamics are not as smooth and linear as they are commonly understood to be. Indeed, Goldstone and Kocornik-Mina (2013) show that such trajectories are often highly nonlinear and exhibit extreme irregularity: many countries “bounce” or “cycle” between dictatorship and democracy without achieving sustained economic growth. Additionally, the growth of the middle class—which has been proposed as a causal mechanism linking the two variables—does not adequately explain its successful transition from a poor authoritarian country to a wealthy democratic country.<sup>3</sup>

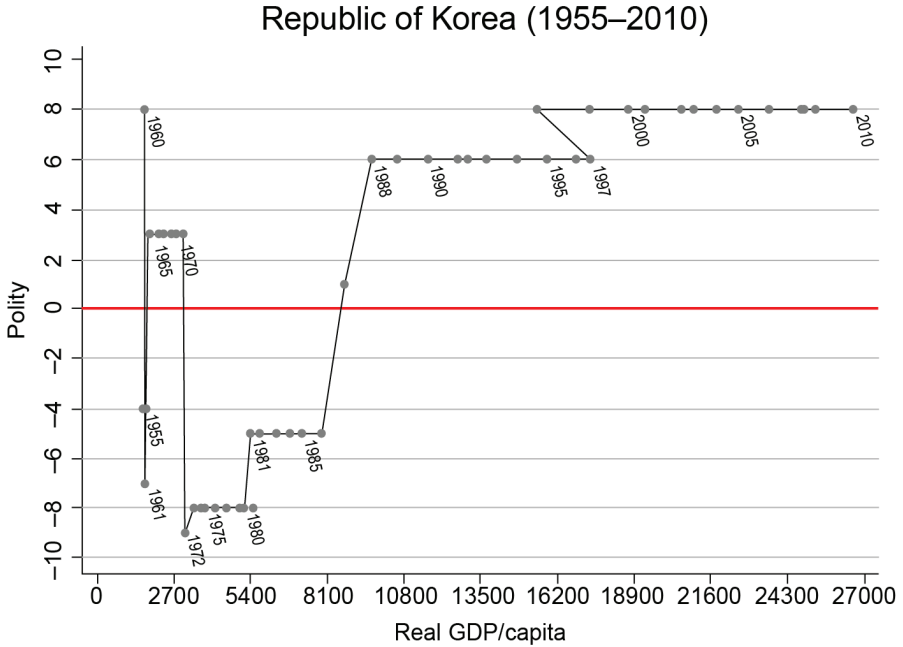


Fig 1.1. Development vs. democracy in South Korea, 1955–2010. This figure comes from Goldstone and Kocronik-Mina (2013). The horizontal axis measures real GDP per capita using the Laspeyres Purchasing Power Parity measure from the Penn World Tables 6.1 (Heston, Summers, and Aten 2002). The vertical axis measures levels of democracy using the 21-point Polity IV scale (Marshall, Jaggers, and Gurr 2003).

To better assess and understand the relationship between economic development and democracy, some recent studies in comparative democratization also seem to favor a more refined version of modernization theory. This “conditional version” of modernization theory suggests that (1) the “causal effects” of economic development emerge in the medium or long term (i.e., about 10 or more years) (Treisman 2020b; Boix 2018) and (2) economic development creates the contextual conditions under which other triggering factors—such as economic crisis (Kennedy 2010), elections (Knutsen et al. 2019), institutional weakness (M. Miller 2012), and leader turnover (Treisman 2015)—exert effect. Additionally, research shows that the income–democracy link depends on the choice of democracy measure (i.e., the aspects of democracy under examination), the time period in question, and control variables included in large- $n$  analyses (Knutsen et al. 2019; Rød, Knutsen, and Hegre 2020). Thus, by examining when and how the positive relationship holds (and does not hold), these

newer studies confirm the need to further enhance and engage with modernization theory. And given that cross-national large- $n$  studies are sensitive to model specifications and data coding, single-country research may be useful in identifying the causal mechanisms that drive the conditional effect of economic development on democracy.

This book provides a single-country case study on Korea's democratic transition. It uses Korea to clarify modernization theory by identifying the causal pathway that accounts for the positive *nonlinear* relationship that exists between economic development and democracy. John Gerring (2007, 241) refers to such a case as a "pathway case"—that is, one whose purpose is to elucidate causal mechanisms rather than to confirm or dismiss a general theory. He further states that "the pathway case exists only in circumstances in which cross-case covariational patterns are well studied and in which the mechanism linking [the explanatory variable]  $X_1$  and [the outcome variable]  $Y$  remains dim" (239); he says that a viable pathway case will be one in which "the addition of  $X_1$  pushes the case toward the regression line" (243). Thus, if Korea is to be used as a pathway case, the addition of the country's national income should push it toward a regression line that displays a positive correlation between income and democracy. As discussed earlier, despite the nonlinear improvement in its "democracy score," Korea continued to exhibit economic growth and became more democratic even after the transition. The fact that this positive correlation existed both during and after democratization makes Korea a good candidate for a pathway case study to elucidate the causal mechanisms and thereby clarify modernization theory.

### *Democratization "from Above" or "from Below"?*

There is no consensus regarding the mode of Korea's transition to democracy. Some scholars have classified it as a case of democracy "from above": although it is unclear whether there was a genuine split among the Korean ruling elites (S. Kim 2000, 4), earlier studies have applied the "transition" (or "elitist") paradigm (O'Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986) to explain that Korea's democratization resulted from a series of elite calculations and interactions (e.g., T. Cheng and Kim 1994; H.-B. Im 1994). Even when compared with other East Asian polities (such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Taiwan), Korea has been identified as a case of authoritarian-led democratization in which the ruling party, the Democratic Justice Party, "conceded democracy" from a position of strength, "with the reasonable expectation it would survive, minimally, and, at best,

continue to rule a democratic Korea” (Slater and Wong 2013, 726). Erik Mobrand (2019) goes further, arguing that Korea’s democracy is a “top-down democracy” in which the earlier authoritarian structures, including exclusive political institutions, were not dismantled by popular movements and actually remain part of the postauthoritarian political system.

Other scholars classify Korea as a case of “bottom-up” democratization, in which pressure from civil society and social movements played a critical role in the transition from authoritarianism to democracy (e.g., S. Kim 2000; 2009; Haggard and Kaufman 2016). According to Sunhyuk Kim (2000, 4), “The elitist explanation of Korean democratization tends to neglect, either intentionally or inadvertently, that there had been a series of massive, intense, and protracted pro-democracy popular movements prior to June 29, 1987 [when the June 29 Declaration was made by the ruling elite].” Research on the authoritarian period also supports that idea, revealing that movements for democracy existed throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, and that those movements played an important role in democratization (e.g., C. Kim 2017; N. Lee 2007; Koo 2001; P. Y. Chang 2015a).

However, Korea’s process of democratization differed from the bottom-up transitions observed in the Western world, which were driven either by the capitalists (the “bourgeoisie”; Moore (1966)) or by the working class alone (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992; Therborn 1977). Additionally, despite the predictions of modernization theory, middle-class involvement in Korea’s democracy movement was largely absent throughout the authoritarian period. Instead, the bottom-up pressure exerted upon the incumbent regime was uniquely empowered by the *cross-class alliance* that students and intellectuals formed with workers (N. Lee 2007, 200; Koo 2001). Given the dichotomous explanation of Korea’s democratic transition (as either being “from above” or “from below”) and the fact that the class-based theory of democratization fails to identify the main driver(s) of its transition process, there is no consensus regarding how Korea’s transition occurred.

Thus, this book aims not only to clarify modernization theory by using Korea as a pathway case but also to reconcile the debate over Korea’s democratization and its mode of transition. In doing so, the book will (1) analyze previously unexamined patterns in pro-democracy movements throughout the *entire* country, not just in Seoul; (2) examine numerous decades before and after 1987, rather than just a few years leading up to 1987; and (3) break down the macro-variable of economic development into meso-level phenomena (i.e., the geographical-spatial transformation



of industrial complexes and student campuses), thereby proposing a middle ground between the analyses of Korea's democratization as strictly "top down" or "bottom up." By moving away from a focus on the national, Seoul-based politics surrounding the moment of democratic transition and the events that fit into a preexisting democratization narrative, this book's approach will yield a more nuanced and complete understanding of Korea's democratization and the impacts that authoritarian development had on it.

### The Argument in Brief

Using South Korea as a pathway case, this book argues and demonstrates that economic development has contradictory effects on authoritarianism: modernization structures developed by autocrats can generate regime support, but they can also transform into sites of pro-democratic mobilization. The democratizing effect of development lags behind the initial stabilizing effect because the geospatial pattern of development only gradually facilitates the organization of social forces. In advancing these claims, I make three distinct but interrelated arguments.

My first argument is that the impact of economic development on democratization is nonmonotonic and curvilinear. As illustrated in figure 1.2, despite modernization theory's prediction that authoritarian regime stability will more or less consistently decrease with modernization, I posit that economic growth can actually stabilize authoritarian rule before it has democratizing effects. As argued by studies of the political economy of authoritarian rule that fall under the "performance legitimacy models," "authoritarian regimes will benefit from greater popular support if they provide high-quality infrastructure, rising incomes, and steady economic growth" (Albertus, Fenner, and Slater 2018, 11). For example, the industrialization and urbanization driven by these regimes create industrial jobs in urban areas and thereby provide opportunities for upward mobility among the poor rural population. The expansion of education used to bolster economic development, including vocational education and training, also provides the masses with the skills they need to find higher-paying jobs. Moreover, as autocratic countries promote tertiary education in pursuit of development, they are likely to balance these policies with good jobs, good benefits, and other perks that keep educated groups satisfied (Rosenfeld 2020, 15). Research on authoritarian regimes show that autocrats are able to remain in power by essentially buying support with such goods and services (e.g., Blaydes 2011; Greene 2007; Kim and Gandhi 2010; Lust 2006;

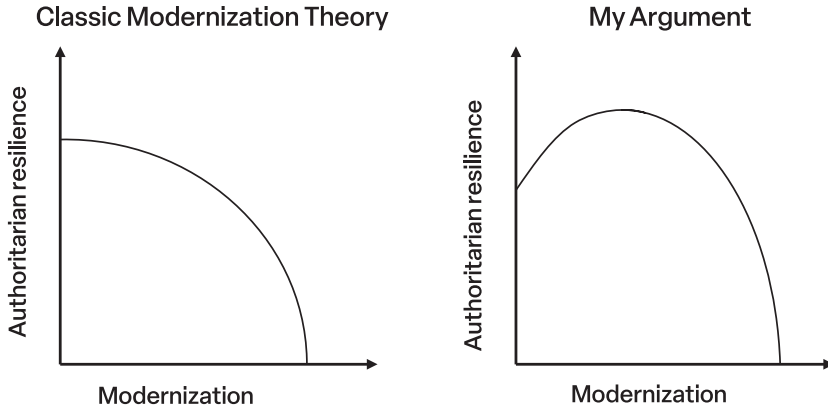


Fig 1.2. Graphical representation of the relationship between modernization and authoritarian resilience: Classical modernization theory vs. my argument.

Lust-Okar 2009; Magaloni 2006; Pan 2020; Schady 2000). These benefits are not only doled out selectively as rewards (to supporters) or as punishments (to dissenters) (e.g., Magaloni 2006; Stokes et al. 2013) but are also distributed more broadly as a way to establish state dependency among its citizenry (Albertus, Fenner, and Slater 2018).<sup>4</sup> Finally, recent empirical studies (including my own) on authoritarian South Korea have found that, in the short term, autocrat-led development buys political legitimacy with economic performance, and the expansion of mass media<sup>5</sup> successfully promotes loyalty to the state, as reflected in increased electoral support for the ruling parties (J. E. Cho, Lee, and Song 2017; 2019; Hong and Park 2016; Hong, Park, and Yang 2022). Taken together, these studies suggest that modernization and economic development may initially help stabilize authoritarian rule by increasing performance-based legitimacy, state dependency, and regime support.

Despite these initial effects, economic development gradually undermines authoritarian resilience because increasing income promotes democracy in the medium or long term (Treisman 2020b; Boix 2018). I will add that urbanization accompanied by economic growth and industrialization ultimately leads not only to increased national wealth but also to increased geospatial concentration of social actors, who are otherwise scattered across different parts of the country and disconnected from each other. Such dense concentrations of social actors can bolster their capacity to organize and engage in collective action against authoritarian regimes. As found in the social networks and collective action literature, such density also increases interactions (or ties) among these social actors, which

provides opportunities to build linkages within and across groups and thereby enlarges the size and scope of the movement.<sup>6</sup> Increased frequency and wider spread of protests increase the threat of revolution and the cost of repression, which in turn increase the likelihood that autocrats will offer democratic concessions (such as voting rights) or full-scale democratization (Acemoglu and Robinson 2001; 2006).

My second argument is that this nonmonotonic and curvilinear relationship can be explained by breaking down the macro-variable of economic development into two meso-level phenomena: (1) the creation of industrial complexes and (2) the creation of vocational and tertiary education sites and campuses. These spatial-geographic transformations accompany economic development—indeed, both are necessary in the transformation from a low-income agricultural country to a middle- or high-income country (Doner and Schneider 2016). Many developing countries have sought such economic development by pursuing export-led growth strategies that hinge on the development of manufacturing industries and an abundant supply of labor. As a result, the development of multiple industrial plots in a single area—that is, an industrial complex (or industrial estate)—has emerged as an effective strategy for providing the infrastructure (such as water, electricity, gas, transportation, and telecommunication) needed to build new factories. Without such a strategy, the high cost associated with creating infrastructure deters individual firms from building new factories and hinders the growth of their industries. Similarly, tertiary education, including vocational training and education and higher education focused on science and engineering, are often expanded to produce a large, technologically skilled labor force within a short time frame to generate productivity growth. In these industrial and educational sites, humans interact with their political and economic systems and social structures to bring about economic development.

My third argument is that these industrial complexes and sites of tertiary and higher education are also ecological sites that have various social effects on the workers and students that inhabit them. The chief effect is the organization of social forces—that is, the creation and intensification of social ties and networks that facilitate organization, collective action, and antiregime mobilization through the establishment of labor unions, student organizations, and ecology-dependent protest strategies. As Stephan Haggard and Robert Kaufman (2016, 16) show, “longer-standing [or enduring] social organizations” (e.g., unions and civil society organizations) are important for “distributive conflict transitions,” as they are “pivotal actors in turning people out in the streets and mounting sustained threats to authori-

tarian rule.” Building on this finding, I argue that the *national organization of social forces*—not necessarily the growth of the middle class, as posited by modernization theory—is the core causal variable that explains not only the contradictory effects of economic growth on regime stability but also why economic development leads to democracy in the long run. Social groups may include economic class actors, like the middle and working classes, but also nonclass collective actors, such as university students, human rights activists, church leaders, and regional elites. At the peak of this national organization of social forces, we will observe (1) an increased number and size of social organizations within each social group (e.g., student groups and labor unions), (2) horizontal coordination within and across groups (e.g., inter-/intra-campus, inter-/intra-union, worker-student alliance), and (3) widespread protests across the country. The horizontal linkages formed within and across different social groups enlarge the size and scope of the pro-democracy movement. And when this phenomenon is not confined to a particular locality (or is not only observed in the country’s capital) but is instead observed more widely across the country, the likelihood of a successful mass-initiated democratic transition increases. This time is when we are most likely to see a country reaching the inflection point in figure 1.2.

According to the “conditional modernization thesis,” the effect of economic development is delayed, and its intensity varies across periods. As Daniel Treisman (2018, 33) states, “If some factor that occurs periodically triggers the political effect of economic development, then that trigger is more likely to show up within a 10-year spell than in any individual year.” That is, triggering events such as economic crises, elections, and leader turnover may activate the effect of economic development, but they can do so without regard to any particular income threshold (M. Miller 2012; Kennedy 2010; Treisman 2015). I argue that, at its peak, the organization of social forces can also catalyze the effect. However, unlike “triggering events,” which are more difficult to predict and sometimes occur randomly (Treisman 2020a), development-induced social changes—such as the organization of social forces—develop and reach their peaks gradually. As pointed out by Paul Pierson (2004, 13–14) in *Politics in Time*, causal processes may occur slowly because they are incremental (i.e., they take a long time to add up to anything), involve threshold effects (i.e., have little significance until they attain a critical mass, which may then trigger major change), or require the unfolding of extended causal chains (i.e., *a* causes *b*, which causes *c* . . .). Thus, even if they ultimately bring about a significant change, social organization initially has a modest or negligible impact and thus allows the stabilizing effect of economic growth to dominate for a while.

The destabilizing effect of economic growth—via the organization of social forces—may also increase the momentum of that growth and overwhelm its stabilizing effect when political opportunities (or openings) arise. The role that such opportunities play in movement emergence and success has been highlighted as essential in the social movement literature (e.g., della Porta 1996; Kitschelt 1986; Oberschall 1996; Tarrow 1996). Despite their importance, however, political openings are only potential rather than actual opportunities unless and until they are perceived and defined as such by a group of actors that is sufficiently well organized to leverage them (McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996; D. Suh 2001). That is, political openings may be necessary but by themselves are not sufficient for mass mobilization to occur in an authoritarian environment. Rather, it is the organization of social forces that brings about democratic change. As the empirical chapters of this book will show, in Korea, Chun Doo Hwan's political liberalization policies in the 1980s provided political opportunities for students, workers, and opposition politicians to form linkages with one another—and to launch the nationwide mass demonstrations that resulted in the regime's capitulation to the public demand for democratic reforms. However, workers and students had to be sufficiently organized and aware of that political opportunity to engage in collective action and to coalesce with opposition politicians in that moment.

Indeed, as articulated in Doug McAdam's (1982) political process theory, three factors explain the onset and development of most political movements: expanding political opportunities, availability of mobilizing structures (defined as "the collective vehicles through which people initially mobilize and begin to engage in sustained collective action"), and the social psychological process of "cognitive liberation" (i.e., the ability of movement participants to recognize their collective strength and to take advantage of political opportunities as they arise). In Korea, mobilizing structures and cognitive liberation had to be in place—in addition to the political opening in the 1980s—for mass protests to overthrow the regime. And these two elements, I argue, were the by-products of autocrats' industrial and educational policies.

Mobilizing structures such as churches, schools, community organizations, and student groups that exist prior to the onset of a social movement can be activated for collective action (McAdam 1982). They provide solidarity, leadership, membership, and communication networks for the movement (Clemens 1996; McAdam 1982; Snow, Zurcher, and Eklund-Olson 1980). In the Korean case, the ecological conditions surrounding the industrial complexes and university campuses contributed to the for-

mation of mobilizing structures, which were the already existing formal and informal organizations and networks found in their communities that workers and students used to organize and engage in collective action. The development of industrial complexes and the ecological conditions surrounding them led to the creation of small group-based networks of factory workers that facilitated the development of the labor movement, including the formation of workers' consciousness and labor unions (chapters 2 and 3). Similarly, the expansion of higher education resulted in an explosion in the number of students on university campuses across the country. These students created a nationwide student movement by rebuilding student councils on university campuses (chapter 4). As workers and students were brought together to work, study, and reside in close quarters, interfirm and intercampus networks as well as a worker-student alliance were created. Student activists strategically chose industrial complexes as sites of mobilization and organized small groups composed of workers from different firms (chapter 3). They also utilized national student organizations to mobilize students across regions and levels of university prestige and connect with opposition politicians to campaign against the incumbent regime (chapters 4 and 5).

The cognitive liberation of workers and students was also built over time inside the industrial complexes and on tertiary education campuses (chapters 3 and 4). And although the Park regime succeeded at hampering labor activism among heavy chemical industry (HCI) workers who were trained through the state-subsidized technical high schools and vocational training institutes, the subsequent regime's failure to maintain the vocational education and training programs weakened the state-dependent relationship between capital, government, and workers. This reduced dependence on the state—in addition to the small group networks that facilitated the development of workers' consciousness and solidarity among workers—contributed to the cognitive liberation among HCI workers who led the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle. Thus, although all three explanatory factors of the political process theory are evident in Korea's democratic transition, it was the industrial and educational policies pursued by the autocrats "at the top" that directly and indirectly created the "bottom-up" factors—including pressure from the social forces—that worked toward ending their rule.

These arguments and findings from Korea clarify modernization theory by demonstrating that economic development's impact on democratization is nonmonotonic and curvilinear: although economic development and democratization are causally associated over time, this

relationship occurs in a nonlinear fashion. My work here also contributes to the emerging literature on conditional modernization theory by showing that the organization of social forces (which results from authoritarian development) is the variable that explains why the relationship between economic development and democracy differs in the short term versus the long term. Lastly, it reveals that Korea's mass-initiated democratic transition was facilitated by top-down factors—namely, the autocrats' industrial and educational policies.

## Research Design and Methodological Approach

### *Examining Democratic Transitions*

Democratization is the process through which a political regime becomes democratic. Although the term has been defined and measured differently by different scholars, most would agree that “liberal democracy is more than elections, but cannot be less” (Schedler 2001, 7). In other words, at a minimum, democracy is understood to be “the method by which people elect representatives in competitive elections to carry out their will” (Schumpeter 1942, 250). The most widely accepted definition of “liberal democracy” (put forth by Robert A. Dahl [1971] and labeled as a polyarchy) is a political system characterized by having fair elections under universal suffrage, offering citizens civil and political liberties, and allowing alternative (that is, nongovernment) sources of information, all of which enhance the democratic qualities of elections.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars typically conceptualize democratization as containing two phases: democratic transition (i.e., the initial transition from an authoritarian or semiauthoritarian regime to a democracy) and democratic consolidation (i.e., the process by which a new democracy matures and becomes unlikely to revert to authoritarianism). A democracy is not considered to be “consolidated” until after its democratic transition is complete. And, as stated by Juan Linz and Alfred Stepan (1996, 14), “A necessary but by no means sufficient condition for the completion of a democratic transition is the holding of free and contested elections (on the basis of broadly inclusive voter eligibility) that meet the seven institutional requirements for elections in a polyarchy that Robert A. Dahl has set forth.” An important caveat is that such elections do not guarantee the completion of a democratic transition, and a transition does not always lead to consolidation. As demonstrated by Samuel Huntington (1991), waves of democratization



historically have often been followed by reverse waves in which some of the newly democratic countries reverted to nondemocratic rule. This pattern is reflected in the many third-wave democracies in the post–Cold War era that later became hybrid regimes—that is, they combine elements of both democracy (e.g., democratic institutions such as elections) and authoritarianism (e.g., political repression).<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, “elections as a constitutive feature of democracy provide transitions with a clear-cut institutional threshold: the holding of ‘founding elections’ that meet democratic minimum standards” (Schedler 2001, 7).

This book primarily focuses on the phase of democratic transition, which is understood to be the period between the breakdown of an authoritarian regime and the conclusion of the founding election that meet democratic minimum standards. Korea’s democratic transition occurred in 1987. Surrendering to the June Democratic Uprising, the incumbent regime announced the June 29 Declaration and through it promised democratic reforms, including direct presidential elections. A constitutional bill was passed by the National Assembly on October 12, 1987, and on October 28 of that year, it was approved by 93% of the population in a national referendum. It took effect on February 25, 1988, when Roh Tae Woo—who had won the founding election on December 16, 1987—was inaugurated as president. Although the democratic reforms were not implemented until later, the democratic transition period in Korea is defined as having started on June 29, 1987, when authoritarian rule broke down, and having lasted until the founding election itself.

In examining Korea’s nonlinear path to democratic transition, I adopt Daniel Ziblatt’s (2017) long view of democratization: rather than focusing on the level of authoritarianism or democracy at a single moment in time, this view zooms out to encompass both democratic breakthrough and subsequent regime cycling. This approach differs from large-*n* studies that use regression analysis (which assumes a linear relationship between variables, including the one between wealth and democracy) and that engage measures that are strictly dichotomous (such as “democracy” vs. “autocracy”) or that conflate the different dimensions (or, as Ziblatt [2006] calls them, “episodes of democratization”) by focusing on the “snapshot” moments of democratization. This long-view approach builds on Paul Pierson’s (2004, 3) argument for “placing politics in time—constructing ‘moving pictures’ rather than ‘snapshots’” in understanding such complex sociopolitical dynamics. By adopting such a view of democratization, I will be able to account for the time-varying, contradictory effects that economic development had on Korea’s democratic transition.



*Examining the Contentious Politics of the Democratic Transition*

By considering the entire trajectory of Korea's democratization process, I capture both the short-term and long-term effects of two autocrat-developed modernization structures—industrial complexes and institutions of vocational and higher education—on regime stability. As important as these structures were in facilitating the democratic transition, however, that transition grew out of Korea's rich history of social movements. Therefore, I focus not only on the regimes' industrial and educational policies but also on the contentious politics that surrounded the transition.

Such contentious politics was driven by the long-standing student movement, which was at the vanguard of the democracy movement and spanned more than 30 years—from the uprising in April 1960 through the 1990s. During this period, opposition politicians, intellectuals, religious leaders, journalists, and other groups were also active in social movements. Ordinary citizens actively engaged in the Masan and Seoul demonstrations during the April 19th Revolution of 1960, the Kwangju Uprising of 1980, and the June Democratic Uprising of 1987. And during the industrialization period, the labor movement developed alongside the growing working class as a democratic union movement, reaching its height during the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987. These last two—the June Democratic Uprising and the Great Workers' Struggle—were critical to Korea's democratic transition, and they were built on the groundwork laid by the democracy movement of the earlier periods.

Most studies on Korea's democratic transition focus on the June Democratic Uprising, which immediately preceded the authoritarian breakdown. However, analyzing protests that occurred both before and during the democratic transition reveals the groups and issues that were central to the democracy movement and their impacts on the transition. Thus, when considering the entire trajectory of the democratic transition, it is essential to examine the Great Workers' Struggle as well. This uprising erupted immediately after the June 29 Declaration. A cable from the U.S. Embassy in Seoul on July 3—four days after Roh Tae Woo announced the declaration—revealed that the Korean people's struggle for democracy was not over: the “student council leaders, professors, the RDP [Reunification Democratic Party (a splinter party from the opposition New Korea Democratic Party)] assemblymen and dissident figures [gathered at Yonsei University for the Grand National Debate on Nation's Politics] generally acknowledge[d] that a political ‘breakthrough’ [had] been achieved,

but warned that *the ruling camp's 'verbal promises' would have to be followed by concrete action*" (National Museum of Korean Contemporary History 2018, 242; emphasis added). The June 29 Declaration had not addressed the issue of labor oppression or the prospect of guaranteeing basic labor rights, so during the months of July and August, workers continued their struggle for democracy and secured essential gains through their protests. New democratic unions proliferated across the country, and the level of real wages increased dramatically.<sup>9</sup> When we do not consider the Great Workers' Struggle in our examination of the impacts that mass protests had on democratic transition, we overlook both workers' collective efforts to achieve democracy in the workplace and the ways in which the autocrats' development policies impacted them and their capacity to organize. As this book will show, examining the various social movements and protests before and during the democratic transition, including the Great Workers' Struggle, helps clarify when and how the organization of social forces gradually reached its peak to bring about a regime change.

### *Multilevel Theory Building and the Subnational Approach*

In examining the long-term trajectory of Korea's democratic transition and the contentious politics surrounding that process, I apply the subnational research method to build a multilevel theory that "combines national and subnational factors to offer strong explanations for outcomes of interest" (Giraudy, Moncada, and Snyder 2019, 19). According to Agustina Giraudy, Eduardo Moncada, and Richard Snyder (2019, 19), "bottom-up theories identify how national and even international phenomena are shaped by subnational factors. From this standpoint, national policies cannot be properly understood without paying attention to subnational institutions, actors, and events." In this book, such a theory of Korea's democratic transition is formulated by weaving together the findings derived from the subnational analyses offered in the empirical chapters. These chapters utilize qualitative and quantitative data to examine the relationship between economic development (as generated through industrial complexes and vocational and higher educational institutions) and regime support (revealed by citizens' voting and protest behavior) observed at the subnational (county; *si, gun, gu*) level. Quantified measures of the geospatial concentration of workers and students resulting from the industrial and educational policies are also included in the analyses to examine the role of this concentration as a causal mechanism. By obtaining the "average effect" in Korea from statistical analyses of counties, I build a national-level argument about

how a national outcome (such as a democratic transition) resulted from the organization of the social forces that were developed locally and then spread across the country.

In conducting this subnational research, I use a mixed-method strategy. I analyze a wide range of new qualitative and quantitative data on Korea's socioeconomic development and its democracy movement. Qualitative sources include Korean-language primary sources and archival materials (e.g., pamphlets, reports, leaflets, and guidelines) and sourcebooks from the Korea Democracy Foundation (KDF; Minjuhwa Undong Kinyŏm Saŏphoe).<sup>10</sup> Primary sources are publications by the Korean government as well as by Christian, student, and labor activists in the 1970s and 1980s, including the Christian Institute for the Study of Justice and Development (Han'guk Kidokkyo Sahoe Munje Yŏn'guwŏn), the National Council of Trade Unions of Korea (Chŏn'guk Nodong Undong Tanch'e Hyŏbhŭihoe), and the National Council of Churches in Korea (Han'guk Kidokkyo Kyohoe Hyŏbhŭihoe). The KDF sourcebooks include the *KDF Dictionary of Events Related to the Democracy Movement* (KDF Events Dictionary; *Minjubwa undong kwallŏn sakŏn sajŏn*) and 11 volumes of the *KDF Reports on the History of South Korea's Regional Democracy Movement* (KDF Regional History Report; *Chiyŏk minjubwa undongsa p'yŏnch'an ūl wiban kich'o josa ch'oejong bogosŏ*), one for each region of the country: Ch'ungbuk, Taejŏn and Ch'ungnam, Wŏnju and Ch'unch'ŏn, T'aebaek and Ch'ŏngsŏn, In'chŏn, Kyŏnggi, Cheju, Chŏnbuk, Kwangju and Chŏnnam, Taegu and Kyŏngbuk, and Pusan and Kyŏngnam.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, I utilize the oral history interviews conducted with former student and labor activists archived at the KDF Open Archives.

I supplement these qualitative sources with subnational and Geographic Information System analyses of protest events. Using the abovementioned primary sources, KDF archival materials, and newspaper articles from the Naver News Library (<https://newslibrary.naver.com>), I created three novel event datasets.<sup>12</sup> The first dataset documents college student protests from 1980 to 1987, and it draws on data from the *KDF Events Dictionary* and newspaper articles from the Naver News Library. The second and third datasets document 1,285 events during the 1987 June Democratic Uprising and 1,194 events during the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle, respectively. Data on the June Democratic Uprising is drawn from the *KDF Events Dictionary*, the *KDF Regional History Report*, and *The Great June Democratic Uprising for Democratization* (Han'guk Kidokkyo Sahoe Munje Yŏn'guwŏn 1987a). Data on the Great Workers' Struggle also comes from the *KDF Events Dictionary*, the *KDF Regional History Report*, the *Timeline of the Korean Democracy Movement* (Minjuhwa Undong Kinyŏm Saophoe

2006), and *The July–August Mass Struggle of the Workers* (Han’guk Kidokkyo Sahoe Munje Yŏn’guwŏn 1987b). I also consulted various primary and archival sources from the KDF archives (listed in the appendix) to either identify protest events that are not reported in the KDF sourcebooks or to obtain more detailed information on particular events.

These new datasets are significant because, unlike existing datasets on the country’s democracy movement (e.g., the Stanford Korea Democracy Project Events Dataset), they contain comprehensive information on events in regions *throughout* the country—not only those that occurred in Seoul.<sup>13</sup> Such information allows us to examine previously unexplored spatial patterns of protests. Scholars have noted and acknowledged that both the June Democratic Uprising and the Great Workers’ Struggle happened all across Korea. The students who were actively involved in pro-democracy protests (especially in the 1980s) came from a wide range of universities, not just from the elite ones in Seoul. Similarly, workers from all major sectors in many different areas, not just the Seoul-Kyŏnggi-Inch’ŏn area, were engaged in the strikes and protests during the Great Workers’ Struggle. Despite scholars’ knowledge of how widespread such engagement was, explanations for the mass-initiated democratic transition have not properly accounted for nationwide protests (i.e., protests not confined to a particular location or region) or the process by which they became a national phenomenon.

The original datasets used here provide information on the location of each protest event, thereby helping reveal the subnational patterns of protests and allowing rigorous testing of whether and how these patterns map onto subnational characteristics driven by the autocrats’ industrial and educational policies. These patterns help explain how student and labor movements developed and spread as well as how alliances formed across different groups (e.g., workers, students, and opposition politicians) and the impacts that they had on the nationwide pro-democracy protests in 1987. In elucidating such patterns, this book reveals how various social movements developed during the authoritarian period. Whereas previous works on different social movements during the authoritarian period (e.g., the labor movement in the 1970s and 1980s by Hagen Koo, Christians in the 1970s by Paul Chang, and student movements in the 1960s and 1980s by Charles Kim and Namhee Lee, respectively) show the unique developmental trajectories of each movement and collectively demonstrate how the democracy movement as a whole developed over time, this book uses subnational research to reveal that *space* played an important role in that process by linking the different movements and allowing protests to spread on a nationwide scale.

### Scope Conditions

The theoretical insights from the Korean case help clarify when and how economic development contributes both to authoritarian resilience and to democratization: the effects are different in the short term versus the long term, and it is the organization of social forces that destabilizes the regime over time. These insights tend to be most applicable to authoritarian regimes built around labor- or ethnically repressive economic projects, as such regimes are more likely to experience “bottom-up” transitions (Haggard and Kaufman 2016). However, they also apply to some authoritarian regimes that are more likely to experience elite-led transitions. As Dan Slater and Joseph Wong (2022) argue, some strong authoritarian states—specifically, those possessing “stability confidence” (i.e., the expectation that democratic concessions will not undermine either political stability or economic development) and “victory confidence” (i.e., the expectation among authoritarian incumbents that they can fare well, or even continue to dominate outright, in democratic elections in the post-transition period)—can preemptively “democratize through strength” when facing sudden shocks (or signals) to the authoritarian system, whether they are electoral, contentious, economic, or geopolitical.

These theoretical insights are not without limitations, as they will be less applicable to certain developing authoritarian countries. First, as pointed out by Richard Doner and Ben Ross Schneider (2016), today’s middle-income economies in East and Southeast Asia (Malaysia, Thailand, and debatably China) face greater institutional challenges than those that became higher-income economies in the twentieth century, including Korea. It is more challenging to implement productivity-enhancing reforms and investments because there are more social cleavages (e.g., formal versus informal workers and domestic firms versus multinational corporations) that can interfere with collective action and coalition building. In these cases, it will take longer or even be impossible to reach the inflection point illustrated in figure 1.2.

Second, repression and co-optation in strong authoritarian regimes can shift the inflection point upward, as illustrated by the dashed line in figure 1.3. A higher inflection point means that (1) it will take longer for social forces to be organized nationally and to activate the destabilizing effect of development, and (2) it is possible that the threshold becomes too high to achieve, which would make the regime more likely to endure despite having undergone economic development. The Chinese case illustrates this point: despite its level of economic growth, the country remains

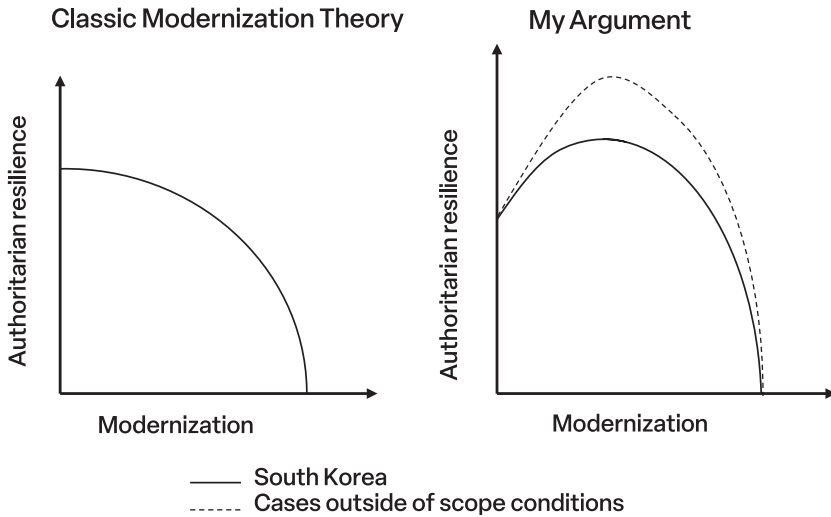


Fig 1.3. Graphical representation of the relationship between modernization and authoritarian resilience: Scope conditions

authoritarian. Scholars have explained that the state's coercive capacity (Y. Wang 2014) and consolidated state repression (Fu and Distelhorst 2018) allow the government to monitor and control the masses, thereby limiting contentious participation. There are also systems of top-down control underpinning coercive distribution in China—namely, the *danwei* (or work unit) system and the *hukou* household registration system<sup>14</sup>—that leave the Chinese populace too dependent on the state to undertake serious protest (Albertus, Fenner, and Slater 2018; Perry 1997). The Chinese Communist Party regime has also expanded the state-dependent middle class (i.e., the middle-class professionals who choose state employment, including state-owned enterprises), and members of that class are less likely to support democracy and participate in pro-democracy coalitions (Chen 2013; Nathan 2016; Rosenfeld 2020). Like China, the strong states in Singapore and Malaysia also have ample coercive and administrative power to coerce rivals, extract resources, register citizens, and cultivate dependence, thereby forestalling democratization (Slater 2012; Slater and Fenner 2011). The forms and arrangements of coercion and co-optation that we observe in these authoritarian countries help explain why social forces may not be sufficiently empowered by economic development to destabilize authoritarian incumbents.

Nevertheless, the causal mechanism linking the conditional effect of

economic development on democratization—i.e., the organization of social forces stemming from ecological sites—still applies to other developing authoritarian countries. For example, returning to the Chinese case, despite the overall weakness of the nation's labor movement (especially under Xi Jinping), recent labor strikes by migrant workers suggest that the ecological conditions of industrial sites—alongside the gradual relaxation of the *bukou* system, especially in small- and medium-sized cities—is contributing to the changing nature of collective labor disputes among Chinese workers (Siu and Unger 2020). In the past, migrant workers in China typically voiced only immediate grievances and did not make long-term demands (regarding future wages and conditions) because, in the face of discrimination for having a rural *bukou* status while working in an urban area, so many of them left their factories within a year. With the relaxation of the *bukou* system, however, workers started to settle down near their factories. Then, starting in the 2010s, they began to protest for future work benefits. Examples include a 2010 strike at a Honda auto-parts factory close to Guangzhou and a 2014 strike of 40,000 workers at a large factory compound in Guangdong of Yu Yuen. The latter was “led by veteran workers in their 40s, many of whom had settled near the factory for many years and who were concerned about their futures” (Siu and Unger 2020, 775).

The ecological conditions surrounding the industrial sites in China also helped build a (precarious) worker-student alliance (i.e., the Jasic Workers Support Group) during the Jasic Incident, a labor dispute that occurred from July to August 2018 at Shenzhen Jasic Technology. Chinese students who joined the Jasic Workers Support Group—just like the Korean students in the 1980s—were exposed to labor issues at student-run university clubs and reading groups. Similar to the students-turned-workers in Korea during the 1970s and 1980s (discussed in chapters 2 and 3), Shen Mengyu, the key media spokesperson of the Jasic Workers Support Group, graduated with a master's degree from a top Chinese university (Sun Yat Sen University) in 2015 and deliberately went to work at an auto parts factory in Huangpu district, Guangzhou. There, she and her coworkers developed friendships on the factory floor and in the factory dormitory. Like the Korea Student Christian Federation students (introduced in chapter 3), Shen carried out an in-depth survey to collect workers' opinions on their working conditions. After she was fired for her labor activism, Shen formed the Jasic Workers Support Group, which was joined and supported by numerous students from China's top universities. About 50 of these students traveled to the city of Huizhou and rented accommodations near the



Jasic factory while they protested in solidarity with the workers seeking to form a union.

These recent developments in China—a case that seems to defy my theoretical argument the most—suggest that although there are developing (or developed) authoritarian countries that have not reached the inflection point, and although that point might be higher and thus more difficult for them to reach, the main causal mechanism derived from the Korean case—that is, the organization of social forces—still seems to hold. And even in those contexts, ecological sites such as industrial complexes and university campuses can empower social groups and organizations to exert their influence and, potentially, destabilize authoritarian regimes.

### Plan for the Book

The remainder of the book is organized as follows. Chapter 2 examines whether and how the industrial policies pursued by the South Korean autocrats affected the stability of their regimes. Specifically, it focuses on the development of industrial complexes, which played a crucial role in actualizing the authoritarian regimes' export-led industrialization strategy for economic growth. The first part of the chapter explains that the development of industrial complexes initially had a stabilizing effect because it generated electoral support for the ruling party. The chapter then presents a statistical analysis of the industrial complexes' long-term effects on labor activism, showing that the counties that housed these facilities exhibited more labor protests during the Great Workers' Struggle than those that did not. The counties that housed these facilities for a longer time also exhibited more protests. Additionally, the analysis demonstrates that the geospatial concentration of manufacturing firms played a role in the causal mechanism that mediated the long-term effect of industrial complexes on labor protests.

Chapter 3 builds on the findings from chapter 2 and explains *how* the industrial complexes facilitated the gradual development of the labor movement. It argues that the ecological conditions of the industrial complexes—especially the living conditions of workers inside factory dormitories and rooming houses—enabled labor mobilization within and across firms and facilitated the entry of social activists (specifically, Christians and students) into the labor movement. The chapter also demonstrates that, in moments of expanded political opportunity, the ecology surrounding the industrial complexes eased the spread of protests and facilitated the forma-



tion of ecology-dependent strategies of collective action. These strategies ultimately contributed to the regional interfirm solidarity struggles in the 1980s, including the 1987 Great Workers' Struggle.

Chapter 4 explores the multifaceted effects of education on authoritarian regime stability by analyzing the ways in which vocational and higher education impacted the development of the labor and student movements. It also shows that the vocational education and training programs contributed to regime stability by hampering labor activism—but only until the government failed at the upkeep stage in the 1980s. At the same time, the expansion of higher education had a destabilizing effect on the regime because it provided mobilizing structures—including student councils (*baksaenghoe*), department student organizations (*hakhoe*), and national student organizations—through which student activists created a nationwide movement and formed alliances with workers (chapter 3) and opposition politicians (chapter 5). These alliances strengthened the pro-democracy movement vis-à-vis the incumbent authoritarian regime.

The significance and effectiveness of the relationships formed between students and opposition politicians in the 1980s are explored further in chapter 5. Utilizing an original dataset on the 1987 June Democratic Uprising, the chapter shows that the areas that were more supportive of the new opposition party (i.e., the New Korea Democratic Party) during the 1985 National Assembly election exhibited more protests during the June Democratic Uprising—but only in areas with a high concentration of college students. The findings of this chapter underscore the critical role of student organizations serving as mobilizing structures in destabilizing the regime by linking electoral activities to antigovernment protests. And as demonstrated in chapter 4, such organizations and coalitional protests proliferated across the country as higher education was expanded under Chun Doo Hwan's rule.

Whereas the preceding chapters examine how economic development affected Korea's democratic transition, chapter 6 explores the enduring effects of that process in the democratic period. It specifically explores whether and how the time-varying, contradictory effects of economic development on democracy are reflected in the generational differences in civic and political engagement in the post-transition period. Using Korean General Social Survey data from 2003 to 2012, the chapter argues and demonstrates that the intergenerational differences in Korea are explained by each generation's relative prioritization of economic development versus democracy, which is heavily shaped by their different formative experiences (or lack thereof) of economic growth and authoritarian rule. The

findings of this chapter suggest that economic development not only has a democratizing effect on the regime through generational replacement in civil society but also has continuous impacts on people's political attitudes and behavior in the democratic period.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the book regarding how Korea's transition occurred and discusses how they help clarify modernization theory. It introduces Taiwan (Republic of China) as a reference case to help illustrate how the causal mechanism linking economic development and democracy varies across different transition paths. The comparison highlights the importance of examining the *geospatial pattern* of development to better understand how democracy emerges in a developing country. Additionally, the chapter addresses the implications of the authoritarian legacy for Korea's democracy in the post-transition period. It illustrates that, just as autocrat-led economic development initially acted as a double-edged sword by stabilizing dictatorship first but bringing it down later, it continues to do so even post-democratization by leaving behind authoritarian baggage that creates challenges to the newly emerging democracy.