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EXPERTS TAKE

Authoritarian Echoes, Democratic Victories: Bruce Cumings on Korean Democracy

Interview with Bruce Cumings

Bruce Cumings is Professor Emeritus at the University of Chicago, where he held the Gustavus F. and Ann M. Swift Distinguished Service Professorship of History from 1987 until his retirement in 2022. His acclaimed two-volume work, "The Origins of the Korean War," challenged established narratives about the Korean War, and fundamentally reshaped scholarly understanding of the region. Cumings is also the author of several other influential books, including "Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History," "North Korea: Another Country," and "The Korean War."

The interview, conducted by Synne Norseth on April 9, 2025, explores the trajectory of Korean democracy, from the regime of Park Chung-hee to the impeachment of Yoon Suk-yeol.

Synne Norseth: **Considering Yoon Seok-yeol's recent impeachment, it would be a good starting point to look at South Korea's past. How did the legacy of the Korean War influence the development of South Korean politics, particularly in relation to state power and governance?**

Bruce Cumings: Well, I think the most important result of the Korean War for South Korea was the enormous expansion of its military. It had been a relatively small constabulary – about 100,000 soldiers – in 1950, when the war began. By the mid-1950s, that number had grown to around 600,000. North Korea, meanwhile, doubled its military to about 1.2 million troops. So, in a sense, both militaries benefited tremendously from the war. Secondly, the U.S. signed a defense treaty with South Korea, which it had not wanted to do before the war.

A third, more macabre point is the loss of human life: an estimated four million people died, about half of them North Koreans. That kind of extraordinary bloodletting, concentrated on such a small peninsula, led to a permanent division of two Koreas. Here we are in 2025, and it remains divided.

An old friend of mine, Dr. Paik Nak-chung, once wrote about what he called the "division system." He argued that one of the war's legacies was that both sides became dedicated to maintaining that division. Those who upheld it were the ones who got promoted. Anyone in South Korea who talked seriously about unification could risk imprisonment, and in the North, they could face execution.

Norseth: **One of the most important – but also**

controversial – periods of modern Korean history include the regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan. In what ways do you think the war shaped this period?

Cumings: The war was certainly very beneficial for Park Chung-hee. He had been arrested in 1948 for participating in the Yeosu-Suncheon rebellion. When he staged his coup in 1961, U.S. intelligence initially suspected he might be a communist – though only for a short time, as he quickly demonstrated his anti-communist credentials. During the war, Park was promoted multiple times, and although I'm not sure of his exact rank by the end, it was much higher than when he started. Park formed a cadre of young officers, all of whom had served in the Japanese army and then, the American-sponsored South Korean military. It was only a matter of time before Park launched a coup, and of course, that's what he did in April 1961.

Park was a dictator, though he did stand for election three times in the 1960s and again in 1971. When I asked my Korean friends at the time what would happen if a left-winger won an election over Park, they would say, "well, the military would intervene." That's essentially what happened in 1971. Kim Dae-jung came very close to beating Park – and despite widespread election irregularities, he still secured 46 percent of the vote. The following year, Park rewrote the constitution, effectively making himself president for life.

There's one point I'd like to add here. I first went to Korea in 1967, as a part of the Peace Corps, and one of the things that struck me was the degree of political discussion, especially in tea rooms – or *tabangs* – and beer halls. My Korean was very weak at the time, but many of the intellectuals I knew spoke good English, and they would just rip Park up one side and down the other. I've believed ever since that Korean civil society remained remarkably strong in relationship to the dictatorship. And that's of course what led to all kinds of protests and difficulties for the next 20-25 years.

Another factor to keep in mind is that by 1960, Seoul had the highest concentration of college students per capita of any city in the world. Educated young people were the shock forces of the democratic protest that were launched against the dictatorship.

Norseth: **Korea's democratization is often regarded as a success story. What role do you think the regimes of Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan had in shaping that transition?**

Cumings: Well, they both had a pronounced negative effect. If Korean politics had been allowed to develop naturally after the 1971 election – without Park becoming a self-conscious out-and-out dictator – I think you would have had an earlier democratic opening. Park's authoritarian turn delayed the democratic opening. The same can be said for Chun Doo-hwan.

Chun's tenure was very different, he came to power in the middle of the Gwangju Rebellion in June 1980,

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which is a touchstone of Korean democratization. In my view, real political change often comes from people in the streets. That's certainly been true in the U.S., with the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, and in Korea, I think it's doubly or triply true.

Throughout the 1980s, many young Koreans sacrificed themselves in the fight against dictatorship. The turning point came in 1987, when millions of people took to the streets across the country, finally putting the death knell to militarism. The Korean army returned to the barracks and, for decades, remained firmly uninvolved in political affairs – until December 3, 2024, when President Yoon wanted them to enter the National Assembly. However, the military was reticent to do that. The flip side of democratization is just as important: a military that wants to stick to military affairs and not intervene in politics.

By the 2000s, another major change had occurred: South Korea became the most wired country in the world. That technological capacity means that in any political crisis, people can mobilize and share information instantly. That is exactly what happened on December 3rd, in the middle of the night, when President Yoon declared martial law. Suddenly, you had enormous numbers in the streets – mostly younger people. I mean, if you look at the demonstrations last week when the Constitutional Court impeached Yoon, the largest demonstrations were young people in their twenties and thirties. The smaller demonstrations were older anti-communists, who represent the dying death knell of militarism and dictatorship in Korea.

When you look at South Korea from a global perspective, it is one of the most successful cases of democratization. When you look at the former dictatorships in Argentina and other countries – they have not democratized smoothly. There has been a lot of democratic backsliding in those countries, but until December 3, not in Korea.

Norseth: **Speaking of large-scale protests – if we look at it from a broader historical perspective – how influential do you think these grassroots movements were in South Korea's democratization?**

Cumings: They were terribly influential. You can see how seriously leaders like Park Chung-hee took the threat of public protests. In 1974, he issued Emergency Decree No. 9, which restricted political demonstrations. Similar repressive laws were passed under Chun Doo-hwan during the 1980s. But the roots of this unrest go even deeper, particularly in the Southwest – the *Chŏlla* provinces. They were always rebellious, going back to the *Tonghak* rebellion. Under the Japanese, the South *Chŏlla* province was off-limits for tourists. And then along comes the 1940s, and you had all kinds of left-wing people's committees, parties and labor unions in the Southwest.

When Park Chung-hee came to power – himself from the Southeast, the *Gyeongsang* provinces – he loaded up his native area with industry: building steel mills, auto plants, and other heavy industries. Meanwhile, the Southwest was left to fend for itself. The contrast between the rapid modernization of the Southeast and the backwardness of the Southwest was glaring by the 1980s.

I remember traveling through South *Chŏlla* on the bus in the 1970s. We were stopped twice so that everybody's ID could be checked. The people on the bus were quite sullen, and a couple of them looked at me with unrestrained hatred. I've never forgotten that experience.

The 1980 Gwangju Uprising was, in many ways, the culmination of more than a century of unrest in the Southwest. When Kim Dae-jung – who was from Mokpo, in the Southwest – became president in 1998, he finally managed to unify the country. In other words, he brought the Southwest into the Republic of Korea. You can see this in the wonderful memorials

to the Gwangju Rebellion in Gwangju and the Jeju-do Uprising in Jeju Island.

The democratization of South Korea was only truly completed under Kim Dae-jung and his successor, Roh Moo-hyun. There hasn't really been any meaningful democratic backsliding – except for a dope like President Yoon, who thought he could drag the country back to the 1980s. And now, as a result, he'll likely spend much of the rest of his life in prison. But of course, that will depend on who becomes the next president. Kim Dae-jung pardoned Roh Tae-woo and Chun Doo-hwan, so pardon isn't out of the question.

Norseth: **There's a clear pattern of presidential impeachments in South Korea: Roh Moo-hyun in 2004, Park Geun-hye in 2017, and now Yoon Seok-yeol. How do you think that this impeachment process fits into the broader political history of Korea?**

Cumings: One of the more curious features of both Koreas is how deeply rooted they are in the tradition of adopting foreign models. Beginning in the 14th century, Korea underwent a profound Confucianization under the *Chosŏn* dynasty. There were all kinds of emphasis on adhering to precise rules of conduct – and how to behave properly according to Confucian norms.

In the 20th century, under Japanese colonial rule, Korea adopted many institutional patterns from Japan – though most Koreans don't like to admit it. At the school where I taught in the late 1960s, it almost felt like being in a Japanese school. All the signs — the Chinese characters and Japanese writing — were just like those you'd find in Japanese school.

Take impeachment, for instance. You have the impeachment written into the constitution, with impeachment procedures, so you follow those carefully. In a way, that's how the rule of law came to South Korea.

Starting in the 1990s, prosecutors – including Yoon himself – helped institutionalize the rule of law, pursuing cases against politicians such as former presidents Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo. They were held accountable, with Chun being convicted of sedition and sentenced to death – a sentence later pardoned by Kim Dae-jung. Particularly since the events of December 3rd, we've seen a continued commitment in Korea to carefully following their constitution and the rule of law.

In the impeachment saga that began in December, we've seen the Korean system function through formal, constitutional channels. It waited forever for the constitutional court to finally decide if President Yoon guilty or impeached. To me, that stands in contrast to the United States today, where the rule of law is often right out the window, especially under Trump. So, it's a kind of formalism that Koreans are very used to.

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***Norseth*: How do you think Yoon Suk-yeol's leadership has shaped South Korea?**

***Cumings*:** I don't think his leadership shaped South Korea much at all – except in the negative sense of building a strong opposition. He barely won the election and instantly became one of the most unpopular incumbent presidents in South Korea. So, his legacy may be more about demonstrating the resilience of Korean democracy – how it was able to remove him – more than anything he did.

One of the few things he did succeed in, though deeply unpopular domestically, was forging closer ties with Japan and strengthening trilateral cooperation with the United States and Japan, primarily to contain China. The opposition wasn't just due to lingering anti-Japanese sentiment – though there is still a lot of that. But imagine that China attacks Taiwan. There are 28,000 American soldiers in South Korea. And if the U.S. were to join the battle in defending Taiwan, why wouldn't China hit American bases in Korea? And maybe South Korea would be convinced to join? That's what most people were fearing most from this tripartite agreement.

It wasn't even close to being an alliance but was more of an incremental expansion built on years of existing cooperation. Nonetheless, this alignment with U.S. and Japanese strategic aims became part of Yoon's legacy, and part of the reason he was removed from office.

***Norseth*: Do you think that recent developments – such as corruption scandals, Yoon's impeachment, and the rise in political polarization – reflect deeper structural issues in Korean democracy? Or are they just growing pains typical of a maturing political system?**

***Cumings*:** I think the most important and deeply rooted issue is the generational divide in Korea, which has become a yawning chasm. A man like Yoon is a, you know, an *upright Confucian gentleman*. I don't know if I'd say he's the most right-wing president in South Korean history, but he clearly rode a wave of anti–North Korean sentiment, particularly among older generations. And he just looked like he was 150 years old to a person in their twenties.

One of the most significant generational shifts – and challenges for Korea – is the attitude of young women toward family life. Many of them simply don't want to get married or have children. As a result, Korea now has the lowest birth rate in the industrial world. Some demographers even warn that if current trends continue, there might not be many South Koreans left in a hundred years. Of course, they usually ignore North Korea, which promotes larger families more successfully.

For the first time in history, they're able to get away with it. Without having tremendous family pressure to bear descendants for the grandparents, and so on. This is revolutionary and, in some ways, cataclysmic in Korean society, because there is so much emphasis on having large families, extending through time, going back hundreds of years. I have Korean friends that will tell me what their ancestors were doing in 1612. So, you're seeing the end of a Korean cultural way of life. And that's very frightening, especially to adults. But it's been obvious for 20 years, and there's nothing they can do about it.

In any case, this generational divide was very apparent during the protests. It speaks to deeper structural tensions – not just political polarization, but broader social transformations that the political system is still struggling to accommodate.

***Norseth*: Viewing the generational divide as a major issue, how do you see it being resolved?**

***Cumings*:** We don't know the future. We don't know what's going to happen tomorrow morning, let alone next year. I've been amazed at how Trump in two months has been able to take down not only the Western trading system, but also the Western alliance.

I have often asked myself over the last 80 years, not that I was asking myself when I was 10 but certainly when I was 20, how long the post-war international system would last. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, it seemed like it was going to last forever, that it was the answer, and suddenly, Trump comes along and breaks it.

And the reason that I bring this up, is because it's an analogy with Korea's unification because we've had 80 years of division. Next August, will be the 80th anniversary of the American decision to draw the line at the 38th parallel. It seems almost impossible to imagine that Korea would be unified, particularly when North Korea has nuclear weapons. But something could happen and within a matter of weeks or months, Korea could be unified and that would go a long way to solve their baby problem.

I suppose there's something else that could happen in South Korea alone but it's difficult to imagine what that could be to solve the situation. I mean, Confucianism was so deeply ingrained in Korean society. I had a Korean nephew that lived with us in Virginia. He once told me that his father had never hugged him and that's because Confucian fathers don't hug their male children. And my own son was flabbergasted by that because I'm always hugging my son. It's a Confucian tradition that's very hard to adapt to the 21st century. I mean, it's essentially a system made for the 14-15th century and that's a part of the gap.

Young people just don't listen to their parents anymore. I'll say something else that's very odd. I've had Korean American students by the dozens since the late 1980s and they sometimes come into my office hours and complain about their fathers, "he won't let me go out with white boys" and things like that. They will talk about a very strict upbringing, but when they go to college, they're just as free and wild. They're excellent students but also complete full range individuals. Every time I open the *New York Times* book review; there's another Korean woman with a novel. Theres a contrast between a very strict upbringing where they're not allowed to do anything but study and the freedom they have when they get out from under that.

That suggests that parents have a tolerance for a lot of different behaviors once the children leave home. On one hand, it's probably futile to try to control their children. On the other hand, they seem to revel in their children's success. It's a mistake to say that some kind of formal Confucian doctrine is reining in parents in Korea, but they're also able to fashion young people who are very creative and successful.

One of the most significant generational shifts – and challenges for Korea – is the attitude of young women toward family life. Many of them simply don't want to get married or have children. As a result, Korea now has the lowest birth rate in the industrial world... the overall generational divide was very apparent during the protests. It speaks to deeper structural tensions – not just political polarization, but broader social transformations that the political system is still struggling to accommodate.

***Norseth*: Do you think Yoon Seok-yeol's impeachment trial has undermined public trust in institutions and democracy – or do you believe it has strengthened them?**

***Cumings*:** I think it has vastly strengthened them. Had Yoon managed to get away with it, we likely would have seen millions of people in the streets by December, removing him the hard way. But by adhering to constitutional procedures, South Korea managed – slowly but surely – to remove him through democratic means. That makes South Korean democracy stronger than it was before, and it was already quite strong.

One aspect we haven't discussed is the Korean economy, which plays a critical role in this. If the economy hadn't performed so well over the past 40 years, South Korea might have faced something more like the political situations in Argentina – places where strongmen gain traction by claiming they can solve economic crises. Meanwhile, the Korean economy continues to grow and adapt. This economic success gives people the space to think about politics in democratic terms, rather than turning to strongmen to reorient a failing economy.

***Norseth*: South Korea is preparing for an election on June 3. While Lee Jae-myung is widely seen as the frontrunner, the PPP could still emerge victorious. How do you see the trajectory of South Korean politics under someone like Lee Jae-myung, or under a conservative PPP candidate?**

***Cumings*:** There are at least a couple of things to note about political parties in Korea – actually, more than a couple – but one important point is that they tend to group and regroup frequently. The party that began as Park Chung-hee's Democratic Republican Party in the 1960s has remained the ruling party ever since, though it has changed names numerous times. By contrast, the Democratic Party has had a more continuous history – and has remained a Democratic Party in both form and spirit.

With the election just 50 days away, I expect the liberal left will likely win. But I mean, you never know. Korean elections have often been close, going back to the 1990s. I remember being on a television panel during the 1997 presidential election, when Kim Dae-jung won by just a whisker. It was an extremely close race, and the last presidential election was similarly tight. So, I'm no election forecaster. But I've told my students many times that I stopped worrying about the health of Korean democracy around 1998. By that point, I believed it had stabilized.

That's also why I couldn't take the December 3 martial law declaration very seriously. It felt to me like an old man reaching back to a tradition that nearly all Koreans now hate – including the military itself. After the end of dictatorship, the military worked hard to restore its image by remaining apolitical as a foundational principle. When the martial law was declared, I wrote an article in *The Nation* filled with satire because I genuinely didn't believe it would last. And I think the outcome has reinforced my view that Korean democracy is stable and firmly rooted in civil society.