Democratic Struggle and Resilience in South Korea (1948-2026)

Fighting for democracy and political rights, while perpetual by nature, has come back into focus amidst recent global events. Globally, there has been a rise in far-right movements, military coups, state violence, corruption, and political scandals. These developments not only signify a political attempt to return to less democratic regimes but also reflect the importance of protecting political rights now more than ever.

Democratic uprisings build on the people's will to change and the citizens' fighting spirit against state oppression, violence, and corruption. The Republic of Korea (commonly known as South Korea)'s fighting spirit reflects a bigger human ideal for democracy; it is an example of constant bottom-up accountability.[1] It is an image of specific cultural traits (which one could argue for or against), but there is no doubt that it prompted a solid movement against authoritarianism and corruption that still maintains a robust stance against political mischief.

Historically subjected to regional powers, Korea is familiar with political power dynamics, both within and outside the continent. Within the region, the peninsula has struggled under the power and influence of the Chinese and Japanese, who have been militarily superior. Outside the continent, Korea has been deeply influenced by the U.S. and Russia (the latter geographically part of the continent but politically tied to the Western hemisphere), which have determined the political direction of the country for the second part of the 20th century. Additionally, South Korea's contemporary history has been beset by authoritarianism, from Japanese imperial rule to its last dictator, as well as recent attempts to seize political power, such as the martial law declaration by former president Yoon Suk Yeol in 2024.

This backgrounder aims to provide an overview of South Korea's continuous struggle for democracy and political accountability from 1948 until the present day. It is intended to present concise contextual groundwork and does not aspire to present a comprehensive historical analysis. The scope is deliberately narrow, tracing a linear narrative focused exclusively on the agency of South Korean citizens—their sustained struggle, collective action, and fight for democracy. Consequently, this particular background piece does not examine other significant forces that influenced the country's trajectory toward democracy and sustained efforts for political accountability, such as the role of religious institutions, foreign aid, international pressure, or economic factors. Instead, it offers a focused walk along the arc of citizen will, culminating in an examination of modern examples where this civic agency manifests in holding politicians accountable. This also allows for future research or background pieces to delve deeper into other forces that influenced South Korea's road to democracy.

Syngman Rhee (1948-1960)

The democratization movement in South Korea[2] emerged in opposition to the anti-communist dictator Syngman Rhee[3] (1948-1960), the first president of the Republic of Korea. After the Korean War (1950-1953), the peninsula was left divided by ideological conflicts. Though the hand and influence of the U.S., a strong anti-communist state was established in the South, prioritizing Cold War interests over the left's state-building initiatives (which were backed by peasants and workers). Thus, Rhee, a strong anti-communist and activist for Korean Independence, was appointed head of the government in 1945 before the first elections took place five years later. His ties to American allies secured his position, as he was the only Korean leader known to the foreign power. Rhee's political organization and campaign (centered on Korean independence and unification) were supported by the police and military branches. His party won the elections in 1948, and he was re-elected in 1952, 1956, and 1960. Although liberal democratic institutions existed, they were merely formal within the extreme anti-communist system, and Rhee effectively assumed dictatorial powers once he was elected as president in 1948.

Rhee's dictatorship began to weaken as he attempted to prolong his rule through unconstitutional means, sparking criticism from the opposition (mainly the Democratic Party, the Progressive Party and student-led protesters). As widespread discontent with corruption and political repression grew, it was unlikely that he would be elected once again in 1960. This prompted Rhee to order the mass arrest of opposing politicians, which ended up granting him 74 percent of the vote in the March 15 presidential elections. The rigging of the elections triggered a protest in Masan in March 1960. The police confronted the crowd, opening fire. The death of a student, whose body appeared inMasan Harbor[4] after the police action, laid the foundation for the national movement that would be known as the April 19 Revolution.[5] The student-led revolution demanded new elections, and it successfully brought down Rhee's regime, forcing him to resign and marking the beginning of the Second Republic[6] (June 1960-May 1961). Prime Minister Heo Jeong (April-August 1960) was put in charge of the government after Rhee's departure until the new Prime Minister was elected. The National Assembly rewrote the constitution to replace the U.S.-type presidential system with a European-style parliamentary democracy. However, as soon as the new Prime Minister, Chang Myun, was elected in July 1960, his party (the Democratic Party) collapsed due to internal divisions, which resulted in a fragmented National Assembly.[7] The new government was incapable of meeting the democratic demands of the public and could not prevent Park Chung-Hee's military coup on May 16, 1961, which effectively ended the Second Republic.

Park Chung-Hee (1961-1979)

The success of the military coup that initiated the Park Chung-Hee regime (1961-1979), rested on the military's monopoly on coercive power. Although it lacked legitimacy, this was compensated for its successful export-oriented economic development,[8] led by the First and Second Five-Year Plans (1962 and 1967, respectively). This achievement, however, did not stop the citizens' fight for democracy: the rapid economic growth fostered an environment of change in South Korean society. The rural population flowed into the cities, ending up as cheap labor in factories and service industries. The effects of economic development were clearly uneven, benefiting big corporations while leaving laborers behind. As the economic gap widened, so did the antagonism between the working class and their employers.

Progressive voices began to rise, demanding a fairer distribution of wealth and developing into hopes of higher political participation. Students and intellectuals mainly led the demonstrations and protests against the regime. Their role was deeply influenced by Confucianism, where educated individuals have responsibilities towards society.

Education motivated students to provide "minjung"[9] with ideological justification, adopting and often playing leading roles in organizing the movement. These leaders, self-claimed representatives of the mass (undongkwŏn[10] or activists), felt obliged to correct the course of history, embodying the "history from below" perspective. Activists moved closer to factories, where they devoted themselves to awakening the working class and spreading consciousness among workers to mobilize them into the protest movement.

The importance of a perceived failure of Korean history is key to understanding the students' and intellectuals' drive to change the socio-economic environment of the country. Modern Korean history had been marked by foreign colonialism, international interventions, civil war, division, and authoritarianism, which scholars perceived to have made the citizens a subject incapable of taking control of their own history, always influenced and directed by others. The continued struggle and internal confrontation fueled perceptions of failure among the youth, prompting them to re-evaluate and reinterpret major historical events in Korean history. The student movement was a contestation of their own history, identifying the "minjung" (as the oppressed, common people) to be the true subject of historical development, capable of social change. "Minjung" came to embody those who were oppressed in the sociopolitical system, people alienated from political power, social prestige, and cultural privileges, placed into subordinate positions by the ruling elite, but who were capable of revolting against it. Thus, "minjung" repossessed the nation's development, away from state narratives. Additionally, the movement not only reclaimed development, but also "Koreanness": the base of the nation's living culture. In "minjung" theorization, national division was condemned as a common cause of failure and suffering. The division of Korea in 1945[11] after World-War II (1939-1945) and its reiteration in the armistice after the Korean War (1950-1953)[12] was seen as an unfortunate result of superpower interests against the wishes of the people. The unification of Korea was a key aspect of the "undongkwŏn's" program.

The democratization movement ("minjung") gained momentum amid the Korea-Japan Conference (1964-1965) and Park's bid for a third term (1969)[13], and against the militarization of campuses and labor exploitation. Park's intention to engage with Japan to bring the necessary funds for technology and development into the country was met with nationwide protests, which opposed both the agreement (with nationwide demonstrations between March 24 and June 3, 1964, also known as the June 3 Resistance Movement) and the signing of the Korea-Japan treaty (from February 16 to June 22, 1965). Consequently, Park intensified repression, culminating in the adoption of a new constitution and the dictatorial "Yushin System" (1972), concentrating all power in the presidency. Under Yushin, the democratic movement persisted, with Christian groups and social movements for workers and peasants joining students. This ultimately led to the Busan and Masan (Bu-Ma) Uprisings in 1979,[14] the largest and most sustained episode of civil unrest against President Park's regime, which triggered internal conflicts[15] within the regime and resulted in Park's assassination in the same year, ending his 18-year dictatorship.

Chun Doo-Hwan (1979-1987)

After the assassination of Park Chung-Hee in 1979, a surge of democratization hit the streets from October 1979 to May 1980, known as the "Spring of Seoul."[16] The democratic bloc was composed of Park's opposition parties and democratization groups, led by students and intellectuals, who launched campaigns to democratize their schools, and pressed for the expulsion of professors who had collaborated with the Yushin regime.

Unfortunately, authoritarianism had not yet perished, as Chun Doo-Hwan staged a military coup in December 1979. He, like Park, also relied on suppression to consolidate his power. However, the newly established dictator understood that

Park's subjugation system would not work on such a pro-democracy multitude, as he saw the citizens of Gwangju (in the southeast region of the country) rising to protest against him. The protestors were met by the military forces on May 18, 1980, in what would later be known as the "Gwangju massacre" or "Gwangju uprising".[17] The citizens, who formed a militia, were able to resist for six days, until their efforts were crushed by the soldiers. This massacre, whose real number of victims remains unknown, was the beginning of Chun's weak authoritarian regime.

As the regime tried to conceal the reality of the uprising,[18] foreign media covered the massacre. The disclosure of new information stirred feelings of action and resentment towards the regime. By 1983, Chun was forced to abandon severe repression (such as the use of the military to suppress protests) and to open up to a "liberalization" of the country through his "appeasement" policies. Whilst violence still occurred, dissident leaders began organizing more structured campaigns[19] against the dictatorship. The "Gwangju massacre" was used as an example of the illegitimacy and cruelty of the regime, and student demonstrations were held every year in May. The symbolism[20] of the massacre provided the movement with the willpower to resist violent waves of repression, prompted the creation of anti-regime organizations, and united the different movements towards a common goal, which facilitated linkages between them. Such organizations were the central forces behind the June Uprising in 1987. The Gwangju massacre provided the opposition with resources for a powerful, militant collective action. The violent episode not only served as the rationale behind Chun's decision to not use military action again to suppress popular aspirations for democratic reform, but additionally, it prompted the prosecution of both Chun Doo-Hwan and Rooh Tae-Woo[21] in 1995, through the Special Law on the May 18 Democratization Movement,[22] proving the strength of the newly established democratic pillars in South Korea.

Between 1980 and 1986, nationwide protests continued against repression: Chun's policies such as the "Social Purification Projects"[23] (사회정화작업) and the Hyungje Bok Jiwon[24] prison camp, constituted a perpetual violation of human rights. The "Social Purification Projects" were connected with the celebration of the Asian Games in 1986 and the preparation for the Seoul Olympic Games in 1988. As South Korea sought to present its economic "Miracle on the Han River"[25] to the world, the regime viewed the presence of vagrants and people with disabilities on the streets as a stain on the country's modern image. Chun made the decision to arrest and remove all threats to such an image,[26] framing it as a necessary measure to "purify" urban spaces for the international spotlight, removing those deemed unsightly to welfare centers in order to rebrand the nation ahead of the Games. One of those welfare centers was Hyungje Bok Jiwon, which has been compared to a concentration camp on several occasions. Survivors, who had often been placed there arbitrarily, have spoken about rape, murder, and forced labor.

Additionally, scandals around torture emerged around the regime, such as the one involving the dissident leader Kim Geun-Tae and the sexual torture committed at the Bucheon Police Station. Ultimately, the death of Park Jong-Chul[27] (a 23-year-old Seoul National University student and activist) after being tortured by the police in 1987 sparked massive protests, drawing the participation of around 60,000 people.[28] The National Movement Headquarters to Win a Democratic Constitution organized a national rally on June 10, which marked the beginning of a 20-day uprising. Millions poured into the streets across the country, escalating dramatically after the death of Yonsei University student Lee Han-Yeol[29] during a protest, when a can of tear gas hit him in the head: 240,000 protesters on June 10, over 500,000 on June 18, and 1.4 million on June 26. The riot police used tear gas against the crowd, and it was not rare to see South Koreans wear masks[30] on the streets to protect themselves

while protesting against the regime.

Unlike the Gwangju Uprising, the regime could not mobilize the military, forcing Chun to capitulate on June 29, promising constitutional amendments for direct presidential elections.[31] During the presidential election, however, divisions among the opposition weakened the party, which allowed former general Roh Tae-Woo (who had been nominated by Chun Doo-Hwan) to win with 36.6 percent of the vote. Thus, the democratic transition was a mere formality, and it was not fully achieved until a decade later[32] in 1997 with the victory of Kim Dae-Jung (1998-2003), as it marked the first transition of power[33] from the ruling to the opposition party in Korea's modern history. Under Kim Dae-Jung, feminist movements[34] were able to achieve the adoption of a law against sexual discrimination (1999) and the creation of the Ministry for Gender Equality (2001). However, Kim Young-Sam (1993-1998),[35] his predecessor, was key in the democratic transition, as he implemented a number of reforms aimed at tackling corruption. He also had both Chun Doo-Hwan and Roh Tae-Woo indicted on mutiny and treason charges.

Roh Moo-Hyun[36] (2003-2008), Kim Dae-Jung's successor, also continued to advocate for democratic reforms, and refused to compromise with the pro-military party. He was a human rights lawyer who had opposed Chun's regime fiercely. Despite being impeached in 2004 by the parliament, public discontent over this move led to his reinstatement after the Constitutional Court overturned the impeachment.

The arrival of democracy and the advancement of capitalism in South Korea led to changes in the class structure, blurring the traditional conception of "minjung" and the oppression of classes. The discourse failed to adapt to the changing era, but the political fighting spirit endured.

Lee Myung-Bak (2008-2013)

The loss of "minjung" did not signal the end of the Korean political fighting spirit. The new century has brought many examples of citizens on the streets peacefully protesting governmental

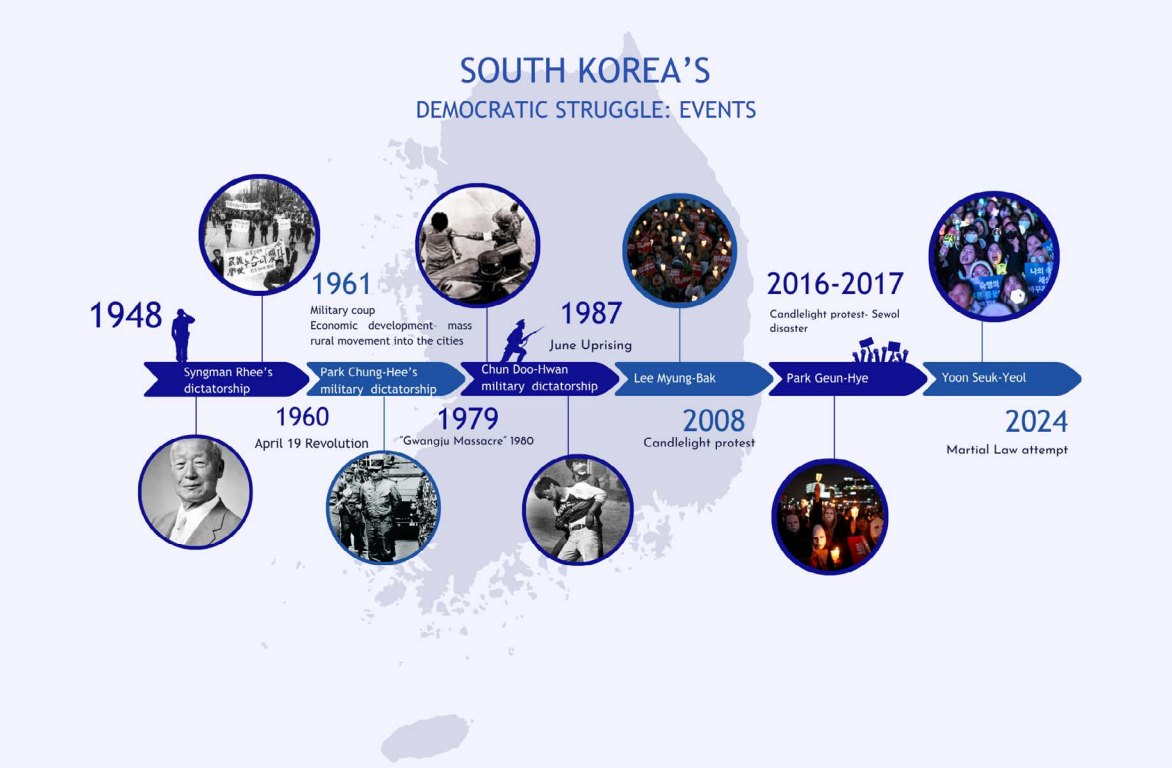

Figure 1. **South Korea's Democratic Struggle: Events. Timeline from 1948-2024**

action or policies. In 2008, Lee Myung-Bak's government faced backlash when it agreed to open its domestic markets to the U.S. beef industry.[37] The government's decision was publicly perceived at the beginning as a lack of concern for the nation's health and well-being, but it eventually evolved into a denouncement of the government's[38] actions in the areas of education, deregulation of businesses, and privatization of the healthcare system. Around 80,000 Koreans[39] (in the June protest) came together as like-minded individuals, not organized by any political group or social activists, but simply displaying the real meaning of democracy: "the power of the people".

He was arrested in 2018,[40] on charges of embezzlement, bribery, abuse of power, and leaking of government secrets, making him the fourth president of the country to be indicted.

Park Geun-Hye (2013-2017)

Another show of true citizen power came hand in hand with President Park Geun-Hye's corruption and abuse of power scandals[41] in 2016. Park's government was not only characterized by its lack of accountability during the Sewol Ferry disaster in 2014,[42] and its mishandling of the "comfort women" issue,[43] but she was also the daughter of previous South Korean dictator Park Chung-Hee, whose image was heavily protected by the government. The perception of a corrupt democratic structure mobilized South Koreans every Saturday at Gwanghwamun Square from October 2016 until March 2017. This series of protests is known as the "Candlelight Revolution."[44]

A record number of 2.3 million[45] people was reached in December (doubling in size the June Uprising in 1987), bringing people from different socioeconomic backgrounds, united in the belief that the system was rigged to disproportionately advantage a few and that elected officials were incapable of responding to ordinary citizens' grievances. Park was impeached on December 9, 2016.[46] However, the candlelight movement ended on March 11, 2017, one day after the Constitutional Court[47] decided unanimously that Park's actions had betrayed the people's confidence and "seriously impaired the spirit of democracy and the rule of law."[48] Politicians in the country acknowledged[49] that the street protests, which had amounted to twenty consecutive Saturday nights, were what ultimately compelled the parliament to impeach Park. At the final protest, there were cards that read, "This is our country; this is our justice."[50] Park became the first sitting president to be arrested in the country.

Following Park's arrest, President Moon Jae-In (2017-2022)[51] was elected on May 9, 2017, after a snap election. He was a lawyer and civil rights activist and had been Roh's senior secretary for civil affairs. His policies leaned towards pragmatism with North Korea, both working with the U.S. to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) system in the country and hosting Kim Yo-Jong at the presidential box in 2018. He also issued a government pardon to former President Park Geun-Hye in 2021.

Yoon Suk-Yeol (2022–2025)

However, this would not be the last time the spirit of democracy was shaken in South Korea; once again, in December, eight years later, former president Yoon Suk-Yeol would try to impose martial law in the country. Yoon, who took office in May 2022, was known for prosecuting the corruption case against former president Park Geun-Hye in 2016. He won the presidency by appealing to young male voters through anti-feminist platforms. Corruption scandals around his wife[52] and attempts to halt the investigation positioned Yoon in an untrustworthy light, as the opposition won the parliamentary majority. As the left got stronger, Yoon vetoed all parliamentary decisions.[53] In turn, his budgets were slashed, his allies impeached, and his wife's corruption investigation was strongly pursued, which made him argue that the Democratic Party of Korea (DP) had ties to North Korea and presented a national threat in parliament.

On December 3, 2024, at 22:00,[54] he declared martial law, stating he was saving the country from communist threats. He outlawed all political activity and ordered the military to censor all media. Shortly before midnight, thousands of citizens had rallied around the National Assembly: 190 lawmakers fought their way in,[55] against the armed forces that had been called by the President to prevent any opposition. It only took South Korean parliamentarians six hours[56] to block the insurrection attempt.

By December 15, Yoon was impeached[57] and on January 3, 2025, he was arrested. Around 443 days later, he was sentenced to life imprisonment[58] by the Constitutional Court, although the prosecution pushed for a death sentence. The citizens' performance, who once again took to the streets against political power-holding, was recommended in 2026 as a candidate for the year's Nobel Prize,[59] awarding their collective resistance against former president Yoon's martial law imposition in December 2024. Internationally, the presence and awareness of new generations who had never experienced authoritarianism before were taken as inspiring, as was the number of women who took to the streets to protest the martial law declaration. Yoon, who had always opposed feminist advances in the country, had strong young male vote support.[60] Women and youth took the front lines of the protest,[61] reminding politicians that citizens are still vigilant and aware of the past.

Despite its role in uniting the citizenry once again, Yoon's impeachment and arrest have left the country divided. The effects of political and gender polarization,[62] which have become a global phenomenon, may threaten South Korea's well-known democratic resilience.

Figure 2. **Yoon Suk-Yeol Insurrection and Impeachment Timeline 2024-2026**

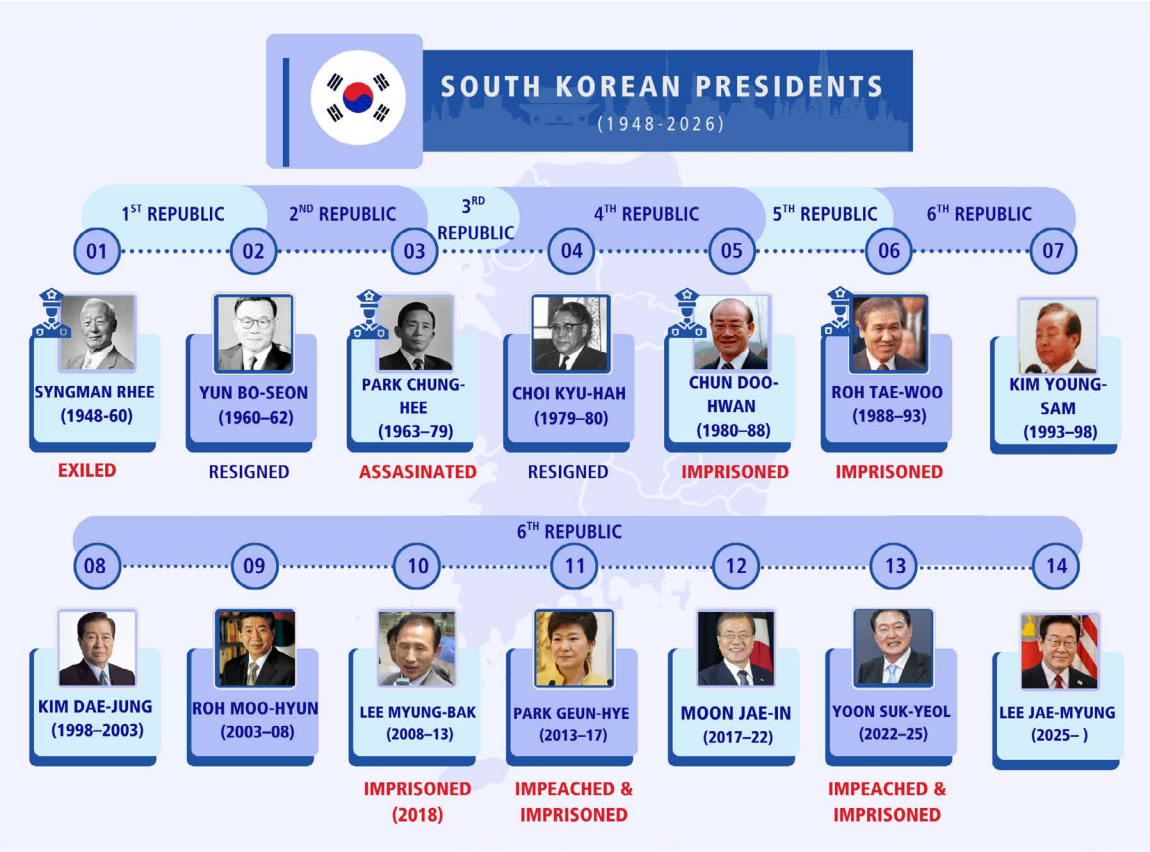

Figure 3. **South Korean Presidents (1948-2026). Presidents and Republics since 1948**

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea's struggle for democracy carries within it a committed fight against political oppression and corruption that has followed the citizenry until the present time. Although South Korea is a young democracy, many still remember the military overreach, dictatorship, and political interference of past authoritarian regimes. Thus, any brief reflection of such times is met with a fierce civilian response, aiming to deter any democratic threats. It is a fight that is not just procedural or institutional, but also societal. It is a whole-being fight, which has set the basis for pushing for greater political accountability at all levels. While often treated as a job, it is understood that being a politician should not be separated from great social and moral responsibilities, and those who fail to meet them should be held accountable.

It is important to draw lessons from this repeated demonstration of willingness to mobilize in defense of democracy against unchecked political privilege. Amidst the rise of polarization and political corruption, South Korea's constant fight for democracy reassures us that citizens still possess the agency to shape their political and social lives, and that ideological divisions should not be an obstacle to protecting the political rights of every citizen when those in charge are not willing to do so.

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