

POLITICS

Korean Political History I Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

A political history of Korea from Japanese colonization and the division of 1945, through the two states of 1948 and the Korean War, to the Rhee, Park and Chun governments and the 1987 democratic transition — with contested figures and unverified claims marked throughout.

10 Chapters

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CHAPTER 1: THE JOSEON DYNASTY'S FALL & JAPANESE COLONIZATION

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 1 · The Joseon Dynasty's Fall & Japanese Colonization (1910–1945)

This course follows Korea's political history from the loss of independence to the threshold of democracy in 1987. It starts with how the Korean state was taken over, how it was governed as a colony, and what Koreans did in response. The chapter is built on reference summaries, and some of the questions it touches, above all the legality and legacy of colonial rule, are still disputed between Korea and Japan. Where numbers are estimates or a source gives a range, the chapter shows the range.

The Squeeze on the Korean State, 1897–1907

The Joseon dynasty did not go straight to colonization. In October 1897 Emperor Gojong proclaimed the Korean Empire after returning from exile at the Russian legation, taking the regnal name Gwangmu. The empire lasted from October 1897 to August 1910 and is described as a brief period of Korean independence between Joseon rule and Japanese annexation. It carried out reforms in the military, economy and institutions. One example is Seoul's first streetcar in 1903. Political reform was limited: the Independence Club, which argued for constitutional limits on imperial power, was suppressed in November 1898.

Date	Event
October 1897	Gojong proclaims the Korean Empire.
17 November 1905	The Eulsa Treaty, signed after Japan's victory in the Russo-Japanese War, reduces Korea to a Japanese protectorate. Gojong opposed it but was excluded from negotiations.
1907	Gojong sends secret emissaries to the Hague. He is forced to abdicate on 19 July 1907 and his successor Sunjong faces continued Japanese intervention. A 1907 treaty strips Korea of internal administrative authority, and the Korean military is disbanded.
22 and 29 August 1910	The Japan–Korea Treaty is signed on 22 August and proclaimed on 29 August, ending the Korean Empire.

The 1910 Treaty and the Dispute Over Its Validity

The 1910 treaty was signed by Prime Minister Yi Wan-yong for the Korean Empire and Resident General Count Terauchi Masatake for Japan. Its status has been argued ever since.

A Signature That Was Missing

One source states that Emperor Sunjong refused to sign the treaty as Korean law required. The document carried Korea's national seal but lacked the emperor's signature, which is a central point in later arguments about its legality. Korea and South Korea have contended that the treaty was coerced and therefore void. Gojong is reported to have called the earlier agreement a "forced treaty," using the term *neugyak* rather than *joyak*.

A Compromise Sentence, Not a Resolution

The 1965 Treaty on Basic Relations between Japan and South Korea says that all treaties and agreements between the Empire of Japan and the Empire of Korea on or before 22 August 1910 "are already null and void." The source notes that Japan disputed Korea's original claim of illegality, and that both sides accepted the 1965 wording without resolving the underlying disagreement. "Already" can be read to mean they were valid until then, or void from the start. The text does not decide it.

How the Colony Was Governed

A Governor-General administered the territory from Keijō, today's Seoul. The early period, 1910 to 1919, emphasized military police authority. The sources I read describe later decades as a shift in governance approach but give little detail on the institutions, so this chapter does not describe them further.

Land

Japanese settlers acquired significant agricultural holdings through land surveys that required written proof of ownership. By the 1930s, in the source's words, "Japanese landownership soared, as did the amount of land taken over by private Japanese companies." The source does not give figures, so I do not.

The March First Movement, 1919

Former Emperor Gojong died on 21 January 1919. Koreans widely suspected poisoning, and that suspicion is described as galvanizing resistance. Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points, which stressed self-determination, also inspired hope among Korean independence advocates.

On 1 March 1919, 33 representatives signed the Korean Declaration of Independence. Cheondoist leaders coordinated the nonviolent protests with Christian and Buddhist groups. The declaration was printed at Posöngsa facilities and states: "We entertain no spirit of vengeance towards Japan... [L]et there be no violence."

Measure	Estimates reported
Participants	Roughly 0.8 to 2 million
Deaths	798 to 1,170 in databases; Japanese officials reported 553 deaths from 1 March to 11 April

The ranges are wide and come from different kinds of source, so the chapter gives them side by side without choosing one. Japanese authorities suppressed the protests violently. The source describes the Jeamni massacre of 15 April, where Japanese forces killed 20 to 30 civilians and burned a church. Japan also ran a disinformation campaign denying the events or portraying the protests as Bolshevik-inspired riots. Foreign missionaries and journalists documented atrocities, and international attention is described as critical.

A Government in Exile

The movement led to the creation of the Korean Provisional Government in Shanghai. I did not research its later history, so the course does not describe it here.

A Change of Method

Japan shifted toward "cultural rule," meaning limited cultural freedoms. The source gives no detail of what was allowed, so treat that phrase as a label only.

Armed Resistance

The source notes that guerrilla forces in Manchuria maintained armed opposition

throughout the period. It gives no further detail.

Assimilation and Wartime Mobilization

In the later years Japan pursued what the source calls systematic Japanization. It restricted Korean language education in 1938 and began a name-change policy in 1939, and historic structures such as Gyeongbokgung Palace were demolished or repurposed. During the war Japan mobilized about 5.4 million Koreans for labor, many subjected to forced labor and exploitation, and tens of thousands of Korean women were conscripted as "comfort women."

Figures and Language to Handle Carefully

The 5.4 million and "tens of thousands" figures come from a single summary and cover very different kinds of experience under one heading. The words "conscripted" and "forced" describe contested and painful subjects that the source treats briefly. The chapter reports them as stated and does not add detail I could not verify.

A Contested Legacy

The source describes the colonial period as deeply contested, with continuing disputes between Japan and South Korea over how to interpret its events and consequences. This course does not take a position on those debates. What it can say is limited to the sourced facts: how the Korean state lost its independence, that the legal basis of that loss is disputed, and how Koreans resisted.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 2 turns to August 1945, when Japan's defeat ended colonial rule and Korea was divided at the 38th parallel. The organizations and leaders that emerged from this chapter's resistance, including the exile government, matter there.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Set out the 1905, 1907 and 1910 steps in order and say what each removed from Korean control. Then explain why the 1965 wording "already null and void" did not settle the dispute.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Write one careful sentence about the death toll of the March First Movement that gives the ranges, names the kinds of source, and does not choose a single figure.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

A student writes "Korea was colonized in 1905." Identify what is imprecise, using the timeline in this chapter, and rewrite the sentence.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **1897:** Korean Empire proclaimed by Gojong (lasts to August 1910)
- **17 Nov 1905:** Eulsa Treaty, protectorate; **19 July 1907:** Gojong forced to abdicate; 1907 treaty and army disbanded
- **22 / 29 Aug 1910:** Japan–Korea Treaty signed / proclaimed; signed by Yi Wan-yong and Terauchi Masatake; Sunjong reportedly did not sign
- **1965:** Basic Relations Treaty says earlier treaties "already null and void," leaving the dispute open
- **1910–1919:** military police emphasis under a Governor-General in Keijō
- **1 March 1919:** Declaration of Independence, 33 signers; participants about 0.8–2 million; deaths 798–1,170 (databases), 553 (Japanese officials, to 11 April)

- **1938 / 1939:** language education restricted / name-change policy begins; about 5.4 million Koreans mobilized for labor (single source)
- **Not covered:** the Provisional Government's history, "cultural rule" details, colonial economy in figures

CHAPTER 2: LIBERATION & DIVISION AT THE 38TH PARALLEL

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 2 · Liberation & Division at the 38th Parallel (1945)

Chapter 1 ended with Japan's rule of Korea about to end. This chapter covers what replaced it: not one Korean government but two foreign occupations, split at a line drawn in Washington within days. It follows how the line was chosen, how the two occupation authorities governed differently, what Koreans tried to build in the meantime, and how the attempt to reunite the country through trusteeship failed. The chapter draws on reference summaries, which agree on most dates. Where they give conflicting dates for later events, it says so.

Drawing the Line

On 10 August 1945 Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel were assigned to define occupation zones for Korea. They used a National Geographic map and selected the 38th parallel. Rusk is later reported to have said that he "almost surely would have chosen a different line" had he known Korean history. The same day, the sources say, Soviet forces entered northern Korea.

A Decision Made Outside Korea

The division was chosen by two American officers working from a map, in response to a wartime timetable, with no Korean participation in the source's account. That does not by itself show what the division later caused. It shows why Koreans across the spectrum came to regard it as imposed, a theme that recurs through the chapters that follow.

Date (1945)	Event
10 August	Rusk and Bonesteel select the 38th parallel; Soviet forces enter northern Korea.
24 August	Soviet forces secure Pyongyang; the Soviet Civil Administration begins in the north.
6 September	The People's Republic of Korea (PRK) is established.

Date (1945)	Event
8 September	US General John R. Hodge lands at Incheon.
9 September	The formal Japanese surrender ceremony is held in Seoul's Government Building, and the US Army Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) is established.
12 December	The US outlaws the PRK.

The South: The US Military Government

The USAMGIK ran the south from September 1945 to August 1948 under Lieutenant General Hodge, with military governors including Archibald V. Arnold in 1945 and William F. Dean in 1947–1948.

Colonial Continuity

Hodge initially announced that the Japanese colonial government would remain intact, including its personnel. After public backlash he replaced the governor-general but kept former Japanese bureaucrats as advisors, a decision that is described as fueling resentment.

Political Suppression

The administration refused to recognize the Provisional Government of the Republic of Korea (the exile government from Chapter 1) and outlawed the People's Republic of Korea shortly after arriving, though the PRK is described as popular among Koreans.

Unrest and Hardship

An "Autumn Uprising" broke out in October 1946 after authorities fired on protesters in Daegu, killing workers. A 1947 State Department assessment concluded the US "has done little more than hold its own in South Korea."

One Striking Number, One Source

The same source says free-market reforms on rice distribution backfired, causing profiteering and hunger despite increased crop yields, and that rice prices rose from 9.4 yen to 2,800 yen over the period. I could not check that figure against a second source, so read it as reported and not as a measured rate of inflation.

The North: The Soviet Civil Administration

The Soviet Civil Administration governed the north from 24 August 1945 to 9 September 1948, with General Terentii Shtykov as the de facto leader. A Provisional People's Committee for North Korea provided nominal governance, but the source says it "had no autonomy and merely executed the decisions made by the Soviet Civil Administration." Following the American ban on the PRK in the south, Soviet authorities co-opted local People's Committees on 8 February 1946, creating a centralized control structure. Soviet generals are described as installing Kim Il Sung as leader of a pro-Soviet regime. Chapter 3 covers his rise and the founding of the two states.

	South (USAMGIK)	North (Soviet Civil Administration)
Period	September 1945 – August 1948	24 August 1945 – 9 September 1948
Approach to local Korean bodies	Outlawed the People's Republic of Korea (12 December 1945)	Co-opted the People's Committees (8 February 1946)
Approach to colonial administrators	Initially kept the Japanese government intact, then retained former bureaucrats as advisors	Not covered by the sources I read
Economic position	Mostly agricultural land	Most Korean industry

One source says the Soviets frequently cut power lines and supply connections to the south, which mattered because the division left most industry in the north and agricultural land in the south. I have only that one source for the cutoffs.

Trusteeship and the Joint Commission

At the Moscow Conference in December 1945 the Allies agreed a five-year, four-power trusteeship for Korea. The US–Soviet Joint Commission met in 1946 and 1947 and failed, which the source attributes to Cold War antagonism and Korean opposition to trusteeship. I did not find a source detailing Korean positions on trusteeship, so the chapter does not describe them.

A Killing at the Center

On 19 July 1947 Lyuh Woon-hyung was assassinated by Han Chigeun. I have no source on his role or on the motive, so the chapter records the event and does not interpret it.

The United Nations and Two Elections

On 14 November 1947 a UN resolution called for separate elections in the south. Elections were held in the south on 10 May 1948, and the Republic of Korea was formally declared on 15 August 1948, ending the military government. American troops withdrew in 1949, according to the USAMGIK source.

Sources Disagree on the North's Founding

One source says North Korea was established on 10 July 1948. The Soviet Civil Administration source says the Democratic People's Republic of Korea was proclaimed on 10 July 1948 but also says Kim Il Sung became premier on 9 September 1948 and that Soviet forces withdrew in December 1948. It also mentions August 1948 elections. These dates do not line up cleanly, and I could not resolve them here. Chapter 3 returns to this with better sourcing.

Looking Ahead

Chapter 3 covers the founding of the two states, Syngman Rhee's Republic of Korea and Kim Il Sung's Democratic People's Republic. The occupation policies described here shaped both, so keep the two columns of the comparison table in mind.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Using the timeline and the two occupation descriptions, explain how the US and Soviet authorities each treated the People's Republic and the People's Committees, and say what that suggests about their aims.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A student writes "the US and USSR agreed to divide Korea at the 38th parallel after negotiating with Korean leaders." Identify what the chapter's sources do and do not support, and rewrite the sentence.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one figure or date in this chapter that is single-source or that sources give differently, explain why you would hesitate to repeat it, and say what evidence would settle it.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **10 Aug 1945:** Rusk and Bonesteel pick the 38th parallel from a National Geographic map; Soviet forces enter the north
- **24 Aug:** Soviets secure Pyongyang; **6 Sep:** People's Republic established; **8–9 Sep:** Hodge lands, surrender ceremony in Seoul, USAMGIK begins
- **12 Dec 1945:** US outlaws the PRK; **8 Feb 1946:** Soviets co-opt the People's Committees

- **Dec 1945:** Moscow Conference agrees a five-year, four-power trusteeship
- **1946–1947:** Joint Commission fails; **Oct 1946:** Daegu Autumn Uprising; **19 Jul 1947:** Lyuh Woon-hyung assassinated
- **14 Nov 1947:** UN resolution for separate elections in the south; **10 May 1948:** southern elections; **15 Aug 1948:** Republic of Korea declared
- **Conflicting:** the date and stages of the North's founding

CHAPTER 3: THE FOUNDING OF TWO KOREAN STATES

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 3 · The Founding of Two Korean States (1948)

Chapter 2 ended with two occupation zones and a failed attempt at a joint solution. In 1948 each zone became a state. This chapter follows both foundings side by side: an election and a constitution in the south, and a party-led structure built under Soviet supervision in the north. It also settles the date question Chapter 2 left open, as far as the sources allow. The chapter relies on reference summaries; the ones for the north disagree in places, and the chapter marks where.

The South: An Election, a Constitution, a President

On 10 May 1948 the south held an election for a Constituent National Assembly of 200 seats. It is described as the first time in Korean history that citizens could vote for a national legislative body. It took place under US military occupation with UN supervision, and reported turnout was 95.5 percent.

Date (1948)	Event
10 May	Election to the Constituent National Assembly (200 seats).
17 July	The assembly adopts a constitution modeled on the US system.
20 July	The assembly elects Syngman Rhee president. One source gives his vote as 92.3 percent.
15 August	The Republic of Korea is formally declared and Rhee is inaugurated; the military government ends.
12 December	The UN General Assembly declares the Republic of Korea the "only lawful government in Korea," in the source's words.

The Results

The Boycott

Rhee's National Association won 55 seats with 25.87 percent of the vote. Independents won 85 seats, and the Korea Democratic Party won 29 seats with 13.51 percent.

Major figures Kim Koo and Kim Kyu-sik boycotted, reportedly viewing the election as dashing hopes of reunification with the north. The Korean left and much of the nationalist right largely abstained.

The Violence

Violence preceded the vote, with approximately 323 deaths reported. I did not find a breakdown of who was responsible or where it occurred, so I do not attribute it.

Two True Statements That Point Different Ways

A very high turnout and the first-ever national legislative vote support the election's claim to legitimacy. The boycott by two major figures, the abstention of large parts of the left and right, and the reported violence support the criticism that the election was incomplete. I could not weigh them further from these sources, and the north could not take part because, the source says, of Soviet obstruction.

Who Rhee Was

Syngman Rhee was born on 26 March 1875. He held American university degrees (BA at George Washington University in 1907, MA at Harvard in 1908 and PhD at Princeton in 1910), was imprisoned in 1899 for anti-Japanese activities, and moved to the United States in 1904. After the March First Movement (Chapter 1) he served as president of the Korean Provisional Government from 1919 until his impeachment in 1925 over alleged misuse of power. He returned to Korea in October 1945. The source characterizes his presidency (1948–1960) as authoritarian and anti-communist. Chapter 5 covers how it ended.

The North: A Party State Under Soviet Supervision

Where the south built its state through an election, the sources describe the north building its through a party and a sequence of reorganized committees.

Date	Event
19 Sept 1945	Kim Il Sung arrives in Wonsan with 66 Korean Red Army officers.
14 Oct 1945	Soviet authorities introduce Kim to the public as a guerrilla hero.
4 Jan 1946	Cho Man-sik, who opposed trusteeship, disappears into house arrest.
8 Feb 1946	People's Committees are reorganized as Interim People's Committees dominated by Communists (Chapter 2).
Aug 1946	The North Korean Communist Party merges with the New People's Party to form the Workers' Party of North Korea.
Dec 1946	Elections are held; the Democratic Front led by the Workers' Party wins.
Aug 1948	A new Supreme People's Assembly is elected.
9 Sept 1948	The Democratic People's Republic of Korea is established, with Kim Il Sung as premier.
Dec 1948	Soviet forces withdraw.

Settling the Date Question From Chapter 2

Chapter 2 noted that one summary gave 10 July 1948 as the date the north was established, and another gave 9 September. The best-supported reading from the new sources is this: 9 September 1948 is the formal establishment of the state, with Kim as premier. The 10 July date appears to be when the constitution was adopted by the People's Assembly, and one source notes that the relationship between the two dates "requires clarification." I could not resolve exactly how the July adoption and the September proclamation fit together, so treat 9 September as the founding date and 10 July as a step whose meaning is uncertain.

How the Sources Describe Kim's Rise

Earlier the Soviet Civil Administration source said Soviet generals "installed" Kim as leader. This chapter's source says Soviet authorities introduced him to the public as a

guerrilla hero on 14 October 1945. These are consistent, but the wording differs in how much it stresses Soviet choice. I did not find a source on his real record as a guerrilla, and the popular claims on that subject are outside what this chapter verified.

Comparing the Two Foundings

	Republic of Korea (south)	Democratic People's Republic (north)
How the state was formed	Election to a constituent assembly, then a constitution and an assembly-chosen president	A reorganized committee system, a merged party, and an elected Supreme People's Assembly
Formal date	15 August 1948	9 September 1948
Leader	Syngman Rhee, president	Kim Il Sung, premier
Foreign sponsor's role	US occupation with UN supervision of the election	Soviet Civil Administration until the state was formed; Soviet withdrawal in December 1948
External recognition	UN General Assembly, 12 December 1948: the "only lawful government in Korea"	Not covered by the sources I read

What I Did Not Verify

Each state is commonly said to have claimed authority over the whole peninsula. The sources I read show that for the south only through the UN statement above, and say nothing on the wording of either constitution on that point, so I do not assert it. I also did not research the Jeju uprising, the Yeosu–Suncheon events or the 1948 leftist unrest in the south, which are significant to the story of the southern state's founding.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Using the table of dates, explain the steps by which each state was formed and say which foundings the sources describe as involving an election, and what limits on those elections the sources mention.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Write one sentence giving the founding date of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea that handles the 10 July and 9 September dates carefully.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

A student writes "the 1948 southern election was free and fair because turnout was 95.5 percent." Say what the sources support and what they do not, and rewrite the sentence.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **10 May 1948:** south elects a 200-seat Constituent National Assembly; turnout 95.5%; Rhee's National Association 55 seats, independents 85, Korea Democratic Party 29; about 323 deaths reported in the run-up
- **Boycott:** Kim Koo and Kim Kyu-sik; the left and much of the right largely abstained
- **17 July / 20 July / 15 August 1948:** constitution adopted / Rhee elected president / Republic of Korea declared
- **North:** Kim arrives 19 Sept 1945; introduced 14 Oct 1945; Workers' Party of North Korea Aug 1946; Supreme People's Assembly Aug 1948
- **9 Sept 1948:** DPRK established, Kim premier; the 10 July date's meaning is unclear
- **12 Dec 1948:** UN General Assembly calls the Republic of Korea the "only lawful government in Korea"; Soviet forces withdraw

- **Not covered:** the Jeju and Yeosu–Suncheon events; constitutional claims to the whole peninsula

CHAPTER 4: THE KOREAN WAR

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 4 · The Korean War (1950–1953)

The two states founded in 1948 (Chapter 3) went to war within two years. This chapter takes the political view of that war: how it began, how it became an international conflict, and why it ended in an armistice that never became a peace treaty. It does not narrate the campaigns; a separate military-history course on the Korean and Vietnam wars is planned for that. The figures are the most disputed in this course so far, and the chapter gives ranges and says where each comes from.

How the War Began

On 25 June 1950 North Korea invaded South Korea. That much is not disputed. What historians debate is the planning behind it. Soviet documents cited in one source show that Stalin gradually approved Kim Il Sung's invasion plans between January and April 1950. Whether Mao Zedong genuinely supported the operation or merely accepted a decision already taken is described as still disputed.

A Civil War and an International One

The war grew out of the division that Chapters 2 and 3 described: two rival Korean governments, each created under a foreign occupation. It was also, from early on, a conflict between outside powers. Both descriptions are supported by the sources, and neither excludes the other. The course does not need to choose one label; it needs to keep both in view.

The United Nations Steps In

The UN Security Council acted within days. Resolution 83, on 27 June 1950, determined that North Korea's attack "constituted a breach of the peace" and urged members to "furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack." The vote

was 7 in favor and 1 against (Yugoslavia), with Egypt and India present but not voting. The Soviet Union did not veto it because it was boycotting Security Council meetings at the time, protesting that China's UN seat was held by the Republic of China (Taiwan) rather than the People's Republic of China.

A Boycott With Large Consequences

The Soviet absence is what allowed the resolution to pass, and it effectively authorized international military intervention. The source describes this as context and does not weigh how the resolution would have fared with a Soviet vote. I have not verified that point, so I leave it as a question.

Date	Event
25 June 1950	North Korea invades South Korea.
27 June 1950	UN Security Council Resolution 83 urges assistance to the Republic of Korea.
15 September 1950	UN forces land at Inchon.
October 1950	Chinese forces enter the conflict.
27 July 1953	An armistice agreement is signed at Panmunjom.

UN forces comprised 21 nations, with the United States providing roughly 90 percent of military personnel, while North Korea received Chinese and Soviet support. I have left out the movements between the Inchon landing and the stalemate, since the sources I read gave no detail and this chapter is not a military account.

Casualties: A Disputed Record

Category	Figure reported
Military deaths (all sides)	About 600,000 to 630,000
Civilian deaths	1.6 to 3 million (the widest range)

Category	Figure reported
South Korean military dead	137,899
US military dead or missing	36,515

Read the Ranges Honestly

The source calls these figures heavily disputed, with conflicting estimates. The civilian range spans nearly a factor of two, and the two exact national figures are more precise than the ranges around them, which suggests they are counted from different kinds of record. I have not checked how each was derived. State the range, name what it counts, and do not quote a single total.

An Armistice, Not a Peace

The armistice agreement was signed on 27 July 1953 at Panmunjom. It was signed by military representatives, not by governments: General Nam Il for North Korea and the Chinese People's Volunteer Army, and Lieutenant General William Harrison Jr. for the United Nations Command.

South Korea Did Not Sign

President Syngman Rhee refused, opposing any settlement that "failed to unify Korea by force." He is also reported to have refused to sign the armistice and to have preferred reunification by force.

A Buffer, Not a Border

The agreement established the Demilitarized Zone, about 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) wide, following the Kansas Line, and created a Military Armistice Commission to oversee compliance.

Prisoners

It required repatriation of prisoners willing to return within 60 days. Over 22,000 communist soldiers are reported to have refused repatriation.

Why "Frozen"

No formal peace treaty was signed and normal relations were not restored. A 1954 Geneva Conference aimed to create one, but one source says US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles blocked progress on that objective. The source describes the armistice as technically still in force, though its supervisory mechanisms have largely become inactive, and says North Korea has announced withdrawal from it at least six times (1994, 1996, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2013). So the war ended as a military matter and stayed open as a legal one.

What This Meant Politically

1. **The division hardened.** The 38th parallel from Chapter 2 became a heavily fortified buffer, and the two states were now enemies who had fought.
2. **The southern president's aims and the armistice diverged.** Rhee wanted the war continued toward unification and refused to sign. Chapter 5 covers how his position shaped the first republic.
3. **The war was international from the start.** The Security Council resolution, the twenty-one national contingents and the Chinese entry show that decisions about Korea's future were not made by Koreans alone, echoing Chapter 2.

What I Did Not Verify

I did not research the US–South Korea Mutual Defense Treaty, the details of the prisoner-of-war dispute beyond the figures above, or the war's effect on South Korean politics in 1950–1953. The claim in the 1954 Geneva paragraph is from a single source. Chapter 5 uses Rhee's wartime record only as far as these sources support it.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Explain why the Soviet boycott of the Security Council mattered to the events of June 1950, and say which part of that explanation the sources state and which part is

inference.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A textbook says "about 3 million people died in the Korean War." Using the chapter's figures, identify what is imprecise and rewrite the sentence.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Explain the difference between an armistice and a peace treaty using the 1953 agreement, name who signed and who did not, and say why the war is described as a frozen conflict.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **25 June 1950:** North Korea invades; Stalin gradually approved the plans between January and April 1950 (Soviet documents); Mao's stance disputed
- **27 June 1950:** Resolution 83, 7–1 (Yugoslavia against), Egypt and India not voting; Soviet Union boycotting
- **15 Sep 1950:** Inchon landing; **Oct 1950:** Chinese forces enter
- **UN force:** 21 nations, about 90% of personnel from the United States
- **27 July 1953:** armistice signed at Panmunjom by Nam Il and William Harrison Jr.; South Korea (Rhee) did not sign
- **DMZ:** about 4 km (2.5 miles); Military Armistice Commission; over 22,000 communist soldiers refused repatriation
- **Deaths (disputed):** military about 600,000–630,000; civilian 1.6–3 million

- **No peace treaty;** 1954 Geneva Conference did not produce one

CHAPTER 5: SYNGMAN RHEE'S AUTHORITARIAN FIRST REPUBLIC & ITS COLLAPSE

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 5 · Syngman Rhee's Authoritarian First Republic & Its Collapse

Chapter 3 introduced Rhee as the south's first president, and Chapter 4 showed him refusing to sign the armistice. This chapter covers how the First Republic (August 1948 to 1960) was run, how Rhee changed the rules to stay in office, and how a rigged election in March 1960 ended in his resignation within six weeks. The sources are short reference summaries. They are detailed enough to date the main steps, but several important episodes of Rhee's rule appear in them only in passing or not at all, and the chapter marks those gaps.

Changing the Rules

The First Republic governed South Korea from August 1948 to June 1960 under Rhee, and is described as the first independent republican government in Korea. The constitution of July 1948 (Chapter 3) had the assembly elect the president. Rhee consolidated power through two constitutional changes.

Year	Change	How the source describes it
1952	The presidency became a directly elected position.	Rhee, based in Busan during the Korean War, "pushed through constitutional amendments" by declaring martial law.
1954	Term limits were removed.	The source says only that he "secured removal of term limits"; I did not find the vote or the mechanism.

A Pattern Worth Naming

In both cases the change was to the rules for holding office, and in the first case it was made under martial law. Later chapters in this course meet the same pattern again: Park Chung-hee's 1972 constitution (Chapter 6) and the constitutional settlement of 1987 (Chapter 8). Whether the pattern is best described as a tendency of Korean presidents or

as a feature of any strongly presidential system is a judgment the sources here do not make.

Repression During the War

The same source says the government was implicated in severe atrocities during the Korean War, including the Bodo League massacre, in which authorities "executed 60,000 to 200,000 suspected communists." It also says Rhee aligned strongly with the United States while maintaining "unification by force" as policy toward the north, which matches his refusal to sign the armistice (Chapter 4).

A Very Wide Range, and One Source

The range of 60,000 to 200,000 is more than threefold, and I found it in only one summary. I did not research who ordered the killings, where they occurred or how the estimates were derived. Quote it as a range attributed to that source, and do not turn it into a single number.

The April Revolution

Date (1960)	Event
15 March	An election is held in which Vice Presidential candidate Lee Ki-poong wins "with an abnormally wide margin." Sources describe it as rigged. One summary places violent repression of student protests on this date.
11 April	A fisherman in Masan harbor finds the body of Kim Ju-yul, a student. Protesters find that his skull had been split by a 20-centimeter tear-gas grenade, contradicting official claims that he drowned.
19 April	"Bloody Tuesday": over 100,000 high school and university students march to the Blue House calling for Rhee's resignation. Police open fire, killing approximately 180.

Date (1960)	Event
25 April	Professors join students and citizens in large protests outnumbering soldiers and police, who refuse to attack the protesters.
26 April	Rhee resigns.
29 May	Rhee goes into exile in Hawaii.

What Triggered It

A rigged election, and then the discovery of a student's body that contradicted an official account. The sources treat the second as what turned dissatisfaction into mass action, though I did not research the earlier Masan protests.

Who Took Part

Students first, then professors and ordinary citizens. The sources name students and professors but give no breakdown by occupation beyond that.

Why It Succeeded

According to the April Revolution source, soldiers and police refused to attack the protesters on 25 April. I did not find the US government's role or the army's internal deliberations, so I do not describe them.

Two Descriptions of 15 March

The First Republic summary places violent repression of student protests on 15 March, while the April Revolution summary describes 15 March as the rigged election, with the killing of protesters on 19 April. These may refer to different events on the same date, or one may be imprecise. I could not resolve it, so the timeline above follows the more detailed April Revolution source.

What Replaced the First Republic

The Second Republic replaced it, adopting a parliamentary system with Yun Po-sun as president and Chang Myon as prime minister. The First Republic is dated to June 1960. Rhee died in Honolulu on 19 July 1965.

What I Did Not Verify

I did not find sources for the 1958 National Security Law, the fate of opposition figures such as Cho Bong-am, the 1956 election, or the death of Rhee's opponent Cho Byung-ok before the 1960 vote. These are important parts of the First Republic's story, and the chapter should not be read as a full account of it. I also have no source on the Second Republic beyond the two names above; Chapter 6 covers what ended it.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Set out the two constitutional changes of the Rhee years, say what each did to the rules for holding office, and note what the sources do not say about how they were passed.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

Write a careful sentence about the Bodo League massacre using the chapter's figure, and explain why quoting it as "about 130,000" would be wrong.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Using the timeline, explain why the events of 11 April and 25 April were turning points, and name one thing about the April Revolution that the chapter could not explain.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **First Republic:** August 1948 to June 1960 under Syngman Rhee
- **1952:** direct presidential election, amendments pushed through under martial law from Busan; **1954:** term limits removed
- **Bodo League massacre:** "60,000 to 200,000" suspected communists executed (single source, wide range)
- **15 March 1960:** rigged election, Lee Ki-poong wins by an abnormally wide margin
- **11 April:** Kim Ju-yul's body found in Masan; **19 April:** Blue House march, about 180 killed; **25 April:** professors join; **26 April:** Rhee resigns; **29 May:** exile in Hawaii
- **Second Republic:** parliamentary; Yun Po-sun president, Chang Myon prime minister
- **Not covered:** the 1958 National Security Law, Cho Bong-am, the 1956 election

CHAPTER 6: PARK CHUNG-HEE'S MILITARY COUP & AUTHORITARIAN DEVELOPMENTALISM

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 6 · Park Chung-hee's Military Coup & Authoritarian Developmentalism (1961–1979)

Chapter 5 ended with the Second Republic, a parliamentary system. It lasted about a year. This chapter follows Park Chung-hee from the military coup of 1961 through the Yushin system of 1972 to his assassination in 1979. The sources I used give a clear political timeline, but they give almost no economic figures, so this chapter is a political account and does not try to measure the growth the period is known for.

From Coup to Elected President

Date	Event
16 May 1961	Military coup led by Park Chung-hee.
19 June 1961	The Korean Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA) is established.
24 March 1962	Park becomes acting president after Yun Po-sun resigns.
17 December 1963	Park is inaugurated as president after an election; the Third Republic and the Democratic Republican Party date from 1963.

A Coup, Then an Election

The source shows Park leading a coup in 1961 and taking office through an election in 1963. I did not find the details of the intervening military government, the election's conduct or its margin, so the chapter does not say how free that election was.

Foreign Policy and Vietnam

- **22 June 1965:** a treaty normalizing relations with Japan, including \$300 million in compensation. This ties back to Chapter 1: the annexation's legal status was a central

issue in those negotiations, and I did not research the domestic reaction.

- **September 1965 and 1966:** South Korean divisions were sent to South Vietnam, and the source gives a total commitment of approximately 320,000 troops, second only to the United States.
- **July 1966:** a Status of Forces Agreement with the United States.

Changing the Rules Again

In 1969 a constitutional amendment enabled a third presidential term. In the 1971 election Park won by a closer margin than expected. In October 1972 he declared martial law in what the source describes as a self-coup and introduced the Yushin Constitution.

The Vote

A referendum on 21 November 1972 approved the constitution with a reported 92.3 percent support, under martial law. Treat the figure as reported, not as a measure of opinion.

How the President Was Chosen

Indirectly, through the National Conference for Unification. Direct election, which Chapter 5 traced to 1952, ended.

Presidential Powers

The president could appoint one-third of the National Assembly, and terms were extended to six years with no limit on re-election. Park won unopposed in 1972 and 1978.

The Pattern Recurs

Chapter 5 described Rhee changing the rules for holding office in 1952 and 1954. Park did the same in 1969 and again, far more thoroughly, in 1972. The Fourth Republic (November 1972 to February 1981, by the source's dating) is therefore the same theme at a larger scale. The sources do not say whether Park copied Rhee's methods, so treat the comparison as mine.

Repression and Its Limits

The source lists events of the Yushin years: the kidnapping of opposition leader Kim Dae-jung in 1973, the executions of the People's Revolutionary Party in 1975, and an assassination attempt on Park on 15 August 1974 that killed his wife, Yuk Young-soo. I did not research the emergency decrees, the circumstances of these events or the number of people affected, so the chapter names them and does not describe them.

1979

In October 1979 the Busan-Masan Uprising occurred. On 26 October 1979 Park was assassinated by Kim Jae-gyu, the director of the KCIA, the agency created in 1961. Political instability followed, and Chun Doo-hwan seized power through successive coups in December 1979 and May 1980. Chapter 7 covers this.

What I Could Not Support

Chapter titles often say "developmentalism" or "Miracle on the Han River." The sources I read named the Five-Year Plans but gave no dates and no growth figures, so I have no measured economic claims to offer. I also did not verify Kim Jae-gyu's motive. Nothing in this chapter should be read as a judgment on how the growth relates to the repression.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Trace the changes to how the president was chosen and how long he could serve from 1948 to 1972, using Chapters 3, 5 and 6.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A student writes "Park was elected with 92.3 percent in 1972." Identify the error and rewrite the sentence.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Say what the chapter can and cannot claim about Park's economic record, and name two other things it does not establish.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **16 May 1961:** coup; **19 June 1961:** KCIA created; **17 Dec 1963:** Park inaugurated, Third Republic
- **1965:** Japan normalization treaty (\$300 million); Vietnam deployment about 320,000 troops in total
- **1969:** amendment enabling a third term; **1971:** closer-than-expected victory
- **17 Oct 1972:** martial law and self-coup; **21 Nov 1972:** referendum, reported 92.3 percent
- **Yushin:** indirect election via the National Conference for Unification, one-third of the Assembly appointed, six-year terms with no limit
- **26 Oct 1979:** Park assassinated by KCIA director Kim Jae-gyu
- **Not covered:** economic figures, the emergency decrees, 1963 election conduct

CHAPTER 7: CHUN DOO-HWAN & THE GWANGJU UPRISING

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 7 · Chun Doo-hwan & the Gwangju Uprising (1979–1980)

Park's assassination on 26 October 1979 (Chapter 6) left a gap that a general filled within weeks. This chapter covers Chun Doo-hwan's seizure of power and the May 1980 Gwangju Uprising. Its central figure is disputed: the death toll of the uprising is given as 165 in official figures and as 600 to 2,300 in scholarly estimates, and my sources also disagree about later details. I give the ranges and mark the conflicts.

How Chun Took Power

Date	Event
12 December 1979	Chun Doo-hwan, commander of the Security Command, carries out a coup.
17 May 1980	Martial law is extended nationwide.
1980–1988	Chun serves as the fifth president, per one source.

What Is Missing

The sources say Chun came to power through "a series of military coups" and name the December 1979 and May 1980 steps. I did not find how he was formally made president, the terms of the Fifth Republic constitution, or how Park's own government ended in practice. The chapter therefore cannot explain how the transition was made legal.

Gwangju, 18–27 May 1980

Date (1980)	Event
17 May	Martial law is extended nationwide.
18 May	Students at Chonnam National University protest. Paratroopers respond with violence: the source says they "indiscriminately clubbed demonstrators and bystanders" with bayonets and rifle butts.
21 May	After unconfirmed reports of atrocities, civilians begin arming themselves.
27 May	The military retakes the city within 90 minutes.

What Triggered It

The nationwide martial law extension of 17 May, followed by a student protest at Chonnam National University on 18 May.

How It Escalated

Violence by paratroopers against demonstrators and bystanders, then civilians arming themselves on 21 May. I did not find the events of 19 to 20 May or 22 to 26 May.

How It Ended

The city was retaken on 27 May, in about 90 minutes according to the source.

The Numbers Are Contested

Source of the figure	Deaths
Official government figure	165
Scholarly estimates	600 to 2,300
Chun's biography summary	"at least 200" activists

Three Figures, Three Different Claims

The source on the uprising says the government threatened arrest for anyone disputing its figure of 165, which is a reason to treat that number with caution, though I have not checked who was counted. The "at least 200" figure comes from a different page and is a minimum, not an estimate. Give the range with its source, and do not pick one.

Consequences and Memory

- **1987:** the source says the uprising galvanized the democratic movement and contributed to the end of the dictatorship in 1987. Chapter 8 covers that year.
- **Trials:** Chun was tried in 1995–1996. The uprising source says he was sentenced to death, later commuted, and the biography source says life imprisonment; I could not reconcile these. Per the biography source he was convicted of treason and insurrection in 1996 and pardoned in December 1997.
- **Memorial:** 18 May became a national memorial day in 1997.
- **US knowledge:** declassified US documents (2021) are said to show the Carter administration had foreknowledge of the crackdown. I did not read them and do not describe what "foreknowledge" meant.
- **Death:** Chun died on 23 November 2021 and, per the source, remained unapologetic about Gwangju; the government refused a state funeral.

Economic Note, Kept Separate

The biography source reports average annual real growth of 9.2 percent from 1982 through 1987 and a first trade surplus in 1986. I include these as reported and do not connect them to the repression, since the sources do not.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Set out the sequence from Park's assassination to the recapture of Gwangju, and name two steps the sources do not explain.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 2

A history essay says "165 people died at Gwangju." Explain why this needs qualification and rewrite it.

→ Solution

EXERCISE 3

The chapter's two sources disagree about Chun's sentence. Explain how you would handle this in a written account.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **12 Dec 1979:** Chun's coup; **17 May 1980:** martial law extended nationwide
- **18 May:** Chonnam University protest, paratroopers respond; **21 May:** civilians arm themselves; **27 May:** city retaken in about 90 minutes
- **Deaths:** official 165; scholarly 600 to 2,300; "at least 200" in one biography
- **1995 to 1996:** Chun tried; sentence reported inconsistently; pardoned December 1997
- **1997:** 18 May becomes a national memorial day
- **Not covered:** formal steps to the presidency, the Fifth Republic constitution, 19 to 20 May and 22 to 26 May

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 8 · The June Democratic Uprising & the 1987 Constitution

Chapters 5 to 7 described three routes to ending or keeping a regime: a rigged election that led to a president's resignation, an assassination, and a coup. The 1987 uprising is different because the regime itself conceded. This chapter follows the events of 1987 and what they changed. My source is a single summary of the June Democratic Struggle, so I could not check its dates against other accounts and the chapter says so where it matters.

The Trigger

The movement intensified after two deaths. Park Jong-chul, a student activist, died under torture in January 1987. Lee Han-yeol, a Yonsei University student, was critically injured by a tear gas grenade on 9 June 1987 and died on 5 July.

Two Very Different Deaths

The first death is described as under torture, the second as caused by a police tear gas grenade. The source names both as triggers. I did not find how the January death became public or what official explanation was given, so I do not describe that.

June 1987

Date (1987)	Event
January	Park Jong-chul dies under torture.
9 June	Lee Han-yeol is critically injured by a tear gas grenade; he dies on 5 July.
10 to 29 June	Large protests, after the military regime announces Roh Tae-woo as Chun's successor. An estimated 4 to 5 million people take part nationwide.

Date (1987)	Event
18 June	About 1.5 million demonstrators fill streets nationwide; police reportedly "lost control of the streets."
29 June	The June 29 Declaration accepts direct presidential elections and the release of political prisoners.

Who Took Part

Students, but also office workers, nicknamed the "necktie brigade," and ordinary citizens, in provincial cities as well as Seoul.

What Triggered the Rallies

The announcement of Roh Tae-woo as successor. It signaled that the regime would choose the next president itself, which the protesters were rejecting.

Why the Regime Yielded

The source says the regime capitulated, and that police lost control of the streets on 18 June. It does not say what the government or the army leadership decided or why, and I did not find out.

Compare With 1960 and 1980

The protest in 1960 (Chapter 5) also drew mass numbers and forced a resignation, and the 1980 protest in Gwangju (Chapter 7) was crushed. In 1987 a large, broad protest coincided with a regime that, according to the source, chose to concede. The source does not explain why the outcome differed from 1980, and the chapter offers no explanation of its own.

The 1987 Constitution and the December Election

The June 29 Declaration led to the 1987 Constitution, which established direct presidential elections and reduced presidential power. It marked the transition from the Fifth to the Sixth

Republic. In December 1987 Roh Tae-woo won the presidential election with 36.6 percent of the vote, while the opposition was split between two candidates.

A Democratic Election, and a Familiar Name

Roh had been announced as the regime's successor. That he then won a direct election, on a minority vote with a divided opposition, is a fact the source states and a reason not to describe the outcome as a simple victory for the protesters. I did not research the election's conduct or the names of the opposition candidates.

What I Did Not Verify

I did not find the referendum on the constitution, the specific limits on presidential power, the term length, or the content of the June 29 Declaration beyond the two items above. Chun's own role in the concession, and the international context, are not covered.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Build a timeline of 1987 from the two deaths to the June 29 Declaration, and say which step the source treats as the turning point.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A student writes "The 1987 protests brought the opposition to power." Use the December election to correct it.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Compare 1960, 1980 and 1987 in three sentences, using only what Chapters 5, 7 and 8 support, and name one thing you cannot explain.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **January 1987:** Park Jong-chul dies under torture; **9 June:** Lee Han-yeol injured (dies 5 July)
- **10 to 29 June:** protests, an estimated 4 to 5 million people; **18 June:** about 1.5 million
- **29 June:** June 29 Declaration accepts direct presidential elections and release of political prisoners
- **1987 Constitution:** direct elections, reduced presidential power, Fifth to Sixth Republic
- **December 1987:** Roh Tae-woo wins with 36.6 percent; opposition split
- **Not covered:** the regime's decision-making, the referendum, term length

CHAPTER 9: BUILDING DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS IN SOUTH KOREA

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 9 · Building Democratic Institutions in South Korea

Chapter 8 ended with a direct election and a new constitution. This chapter describes the institutions that system now has and the evidence that it counts as a democracy. My source is one overview article on South Korean politics. It gives the structure and a few assessments but almost no dates for the years after 1987, so this chapter cannot narrate the presidencies or the peaceful transfers of power that the course outline promised. That gap is stated below.

The Structure

Institution	What the source says
Presidency	A single five-year term by direct popular vote, with significant executive power.
National Assembly	300 members serving four-year terms: 253 from single-seat constituencies and 47 through proportional representation.
Judiciary	A Supreme Court and a Constitutional Court, described as independent of the other branches.

Compare With Earlier Chapters

A single term ends the pattern seen in Chapters 5 and 6, where Rhee and Park changed the rules to stay in office. The source states the current rule but does not say when it was set or who chose it. I would connect it to the 1987 Constitution, but that link is my reading, not the source's.

Civil Society and Party Politics

The source says the country operated under military authoritarian rule until 1987, after which "constitutional guarantees of freedom of association and expression expanded the scope of

civil society." Two parties dominate: the centrist-left Democratic Party and the conservative People Power Party. Scholars describe an emphasis on "politics of the individual" over party loyalty, sometimes called a "partyless democracy."

A Label With a Definition Problem

"Partyless democracy" is the source's own quoted term and I did not look up how scholars define or defend it. Note also that the parties named are the current ones, and I did not trace how they formed or changed names.

How Democratic Is It?

- The Economist Intelligence Unit rated South Korea a "full democracy" in 2022.
- V-Dem indices ranked it the fifth most electorally democratic Asian nation in 2024.
- The source says the country experienced periods of democratic stagnation, particularly from the mid-2000s to the mid-2010s.

Read Indices With Care

Rankings compress a judgment into a number, and the source gives no detail on how either index scores. The stagnation claim is also unspecified. I cannot say what the stagnation consisted of.

Accountability for the Past

Chapter 7 recorded that Chun was tried in 1995 to 1996 and pardoned in December 1997, and that 18 May became a national memorial day in 1997. Those events suggest a system prosecuting a former ruler and commemorating Gwangju within a decade of 1987, but the sources do not describe how the trials came about, so this is an observation, not a finding.

What This Chapter Does Not Cover

I did not find the sequence of presidents since 1987, the first peaceful transfer between parties, the creation of the Constitutional Court, the restoration of local elections, or any of the individual scandals. The outline's phrase "peaceful transfers of power" therefore

stays unproven here. Course II picks up the National Assembly, the presidency and the 2016 to 2017 impeachment.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Set out the three branches of South Korean government as the source describes them, with one figure for each where given.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A student writes "South Korea has been a stable democracy since 1987." Use the chapter's evidence to qualify the claim.

→ [Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

List three things you would need to verify to support the phrase "peaceful transfers of power" and say what each would show.

→ [Solution](#)

Quick Reference

- **President:** single five-year term, direct election
- **National Assembly:** 300 members, four-year terms, 253 constituency and 47 proportional
- **Courts:** Supreme Court and Constitutional Court
- **Parties:** Democratic Party (centrist-left), People Power Party (conservative)

- **Assessments:** "full democracy" (EIU, 2022); fifth most electorally democratic Asian nation (V-Dem, 2024); stagnation mid-2000s to mid-2010s
- **Not covered:** presidents since 1987, first party transfer, Constitutional Court's founding

CHAPTER 10: CAPSTONE: COMPARING THREE AUTHORITARIAN ERAS & KOREA'S REAL PATH TO DEMOCRACY

Korean Political History I: Colonization, Division & the Road to Democracy

Chapter 10 · Capstone: Comparing Three Authoritarian Eras & Korea's Real Path to Democracy

This capstone adds no new research. It compares the three authoritarian governments covered in Chapters 5 to 7, using only what those chapters established, and then sets out what the course as a whole could and could not show. Where a comparison would need a fact I did not verify, the chapter says so.

Three Eras Side by Side

	Rhee (Ch. 5)	Park (Ch. 6)	Chun (Ch. 7)
How power began	Elected by the assembly, 20 July 1948; inaugurated 15 August.	Coup, 16 May 1961; elected and inaugurated 17 December 1963.	Coup, 12 December 1979; martial law extended 17 May 1980.
Rule changes	1952 direct election, under martial law; 1954 term limits removed.	1969 third-term amendment; 1972 Yushin Constitution, reported 92.3% in a martial-law referendum.	Not established by my sources.
Violence named	Bodo League massacre (60,000 to 200,000, one source); about 180 killed on 19 April 1960.	Kim Dae-jung kidnapping, 1973; People's Revolutionary Party executions, 1975 (named only).	Gwangju: 165 official, 600 to 2,300 scholarly.
How it ended	Resignation, 26 April 1960, after mass protest.	Assassination, 26 October 1979.	June 1987 protests, the June 29 Declaration, the 1987 Constitution.

A Table Cannot Be Read Across

The cells hold different kinds of evidence. The Bodo League range is from a single summary and the Gwangju figures are contested, while the Yushin referendum figure is a reported result. The "rule changes" row is empty for Chun because my sources did not cover it, not because none occurred. Do not compare the numbers as if they measured the same thing.

Three Patterns the Chapters Support

1. Rules Rewritten for the Ruler

Rhee in 1952 and 1954, and Park in 1969 and 1972, changed the rules of office while in it. The single five-year term in Chapter 9 is the reverse of this. The sources do not say who chose that limit or why.

2. Three Different Endings

A resignation under mass protest, an assassination, and a negotiated concession. The chapters do not show a common cause for the three, and I did not claim one.

3. Protest as a Recurring Force

1960 succeeded, 1980 was crushed, and 1987 forced a concession. What differed in 1987 is the question the chapters could not answer.

What Continued From the Colonial and Division Chapters

- **Outside powers.** The colonization of Chapter 1, the occupation zones of Chapter 2 and the war of Chapter 4 all involved foreign decisions. In the later chapters the outside role is thinner in the sources: the 1965 Japan treaty, Vietnam, and the reported US foreknowledge of Gwangju.
- **Rival claims to the whole peninsula.** Chapter 3 described two states each claiming all of Korea, and Chapter 4 the armistice that never became a peace. Chapters 5 to 9 are almost entirely about the south, so this course says little about how the north's system developed. Course II addresses that.

Where the Course Reached Its Limits

The evidence for the later chapters came from short reference summaries. Several requested topics were left as gaps: the constitutional steps to Chun's presidency, the economic growth of the Park years, the presidents after 1987 and the first transfer of power between parties. The course outline called the endpoint "full democratic consolidation," and Chapter 9 could support only a structure and a few assessments, not that conclusion.

What Course II Adds

Korean Political History II covers modern South Korea's institutions and the National Assembly, the 1997 financial crisis, North Korea's system under the Kim family, and the impeachments of 2016 to 2017 and 2024. Those are the events that would test whether the institutions described in Chapter 9 hold, and this course did not have the evidence to test them.

Hands-On Exercises

EXERCISE 1

Add a fifth row to the comparison table on "Role of mass protest" using only Chapters 5, 7 and 8, and say what you could not fill in.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 2

A student claims "the three regimes were basically the same." Use the table to identify what the chapters support and what they do not.

[→ Solution](#)

EXERCISE 3

Choose one gap named in this course and describe the kind of source you would use to close it.

→ Solution

Quick Reference

- **Rhee:** 1948 to 1960; 1952 and 1954 rule changes; resigned 26 April 1960
- **Park:** coup 1961; 1972 Yushin Constitution; assassinated 26 October 1979
- **Chun:** coup 12 December 1979; Gwangju May 1980; June 29 Declaration 1987
- **Patterns supported:** rules rewritten by rulers, three different endings, protest as a recurring force
- **Gaps:** Chun's constitutional path, economic figures, post-1987 presidents, the first party transfer
- **Next:** Korean Political History II

Course Complete

Korean Political History I is complete at 10 chapters. Korean Political History II, on modern South Korea and North Korea's one-party state, is outlined and not yet started.