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**The State of Democratic Governance in South
Korea: From the Perspective of Ordinary
Citizens**

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From the Perspectives of Ordinary Citizens**

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The State of Democratic Governance in South Korea: From the Perspectives of Ordinary Citizens

The last year marked the 20 year anniversary of transition from authoritarian rule to democracy in South Korea (Korea hereafter). Korea is widely recognized as one of the successful third-wave democracies in Asia (Shin 2007; Huntington 1991). Since the democratic transition in 1987, Korea has regularly held free and competitive elections at all levels of government. Moreover, there have been two alternations of political parties in power. At minimum democracy can be characterized with universal adult suffrage, free and fair elections, multiparty competition and alternative sources of information (Diamond 1999; Coppedge and Reinicke 1990). The political system in Korea meets these basic standards. There is no doubt that Korea established itself an electoral democracy.

Yet, popular support for democracy has not grown much since the democratic transition (Park and Shin 2006). For instance, preference for democracy over its alternatives declined from 65 percent in 1996, to 54 percent in 1998, to 45 percent in 2001, to 43 percent in 2006. Satisfaction with democracy also declined from 55 percent in 1996, to 44 percent in 1998, to 47 percent in 2001, to 48 percent in 2006. A decline in institutional trust is dramatic: trust in the executive from 62 percent in 1996 to 26 percent in 2003, to 14 percent in 2006; trust in the legislature from 49 percent in 1996 to 15 percent in 2003, to 7 percent in 2006; trust in courts from 70 percent in 1996 to 51 percent in 2003, to 27 percent in 2006. These and other public opinion surveys suggest that a new democracy in Korea is in trouble (Chang, Chu and Park 2007; Park 2007). Many scholars and policy-makers now wonder what went wrong.

In this paper we attempt to examine how ordinary Koreans view the quality of democratic governance in terms of various dimensions of democratic quality identified by Larry Diamond and Leonardo Morlino (2004). How do ordinary Koreans assess the institutional supply of their democracy? How do they experience practices of democratic institutions? Which

elements of democratic quality does Korean democracy lack most or least? By addressing these and other related questions, we shed some light on advances and setbacks of Korean democratization. Like many other democracy assessments studies, we assess the quality of democratic governance from the perspectives of ordinary citizens because they are the best judges of them. To do this, we use the 2006 Asian Barometer (AB hereafter) survey conducted in Korea.

Institutional Democratization: Historical Overview

The democratic transition in 1987 resulted in the foundation of the Sixth Republic with the ratification of a new constitution. Under the democratic Sixth Republic, Korea has experienced a series of democratic reforms on political institutions and practices (Shin 1999). Before the transition to democracy, political institutions and practices were characterized with limited public contestation of power, executive domination over the legislature and the judiciary, control of mass media, curtailment of civil and political rights, and little protection of social rights. Yet, the new constitution of the Sixth Republic restored key democratic political institutions and practices.

The new constitution provides for direct popular election of the president with a single, non-renewable five-year term. As in the authoritarian past, the president represents the state and heads the executive branch of government. Yet, the chief executive's powers are reduced considerably, while those of the legislative and judicial branches are expanded significantly. Specifically, the president's powers regarding emergency decrees and dissolution of the National Assembly are abolished. Legislative oversight over the executive is restored and strengthened. These and other institutional changes render the legislature no longer a rubber stamp of the executive. The judiciary becomes independent in their rulings and appointment of judges and the Constitutional Court is newly established for strengthening judicial reviews. The limits of political and civil rights are greatly expanded and basic social rights began to be protected. The constitution protects political parties against arbitrary decisions to disband while requires them to

promote internal democracy. The constitution also explicitly states the political neutrality of the military.

For the last two decades since the transition to democracy, no political parties, politicians, or voters have been excluded from the political process. The competitiveness of public contestation for power has been enhanced, and elections whether presidential or legislative, have been freely and fairly conducted. Election outcomes have honestly reflected voters' choices. The electoral and party system offers the electorate an increasingly wide range of choices. The scope of public offices subject to public contestation has been expanded to include the executive and legislative offices of sub-national governments. The reach and inclusiveness of popular control has been steadily expanded for the last two decades.

There have been institutional reforms to extend the limits of political rights and civil liberties. In 1994 the Office of Ombudsman was established to address citizen complaints against government agencies. In 2001 the National Human Rights Commission was constituted to monitor and oversee violations of human rights. Since 1998 the Information Disclosure Law has been implemented to give citizens the rights of access to government records and documents.

A variety of democratic institutional reforms was protected especially by the last three civilian governments (Im 2004). First, the Kim Young Sam government (1993-1998), the first civilian government since 1961, attempted to facilitate democratization by eradicating the legacy of authoritarian rule. President Kim established civilian supremacy over the military by purging hard-line military officers and curbed the powers of the domestic security agencies. He enforced high-level public officials to disclose their assets and made banking transactions transparent to dismantle the structure of political corruption and cronyism.

Second, the Kim Dae Jung government (1998-2003) attempted to promote substantive democratization by guaranteeing social and economic rights. President Kim, the first opposition candidate to win a presidential election, released political prisoners and strengthened or established independent commissions for safeguarding civil and political rights. In the wake of

the economic crisis the government tried to enhance the social security system through expanding social insurance and public assistance programs.

Third, the Roh Moo Hyun government (2003-2008) rushed to promote substantive democratization by attempting to level classes, sectors and regions. This left-leaning government's inflexible pursuit of populist agenda divided Korean society ideologically and distanced his government from the majority of ordinary citizens who remained conservative. In the wake of a major fundraising scandal following the 2002 presidential election, the government attempted to overhaul campaign finance laws and to make political funding more transparent.

Despite democratic institutional reforms for the last two decades, however, the last three civilian governments were criticized as ignoring democratic procedures and rules. The prosecution of presidents' family members and close aides for bribery and corruption made their anticorruption reforms hollow. Investigating major newspapers and prosecuting journalists were viewed as threatening freedom of expression and alternative sources of information. Each government abused the president's constitutional power to pardon politicians and businesspeople, which was criticized as undermining the rule of law and horizontal accountability. The first two civilian presidents weakened the institutional autonomy of the National Assembly through holding sway over their ruling parties. Executive predominance in the political process has largely persisted, though gradually abated, for the last two decades.

These political institutions and practices are reflected in various international assessments of Korean democracy. For instance, Korea has been rated by Freedom House as "free" since the transition to democracy. In each of the five years from 2003 through 2007, Korea received an average rating of 1.5 on Freedom House's seven-point scale of political rights and civil liberties, which runs from 1 (high) to 7 (low) (Freedom House 2007). Korea ranks with the world's liberal democracies.

According to the *Economist* Intelligence Unit democracy index whose scores run from a low of 0 to a high of 10, in 2006 Korea was rated a flawed democracy, ranking 31st with a total

score of 7.88. Specifically, it received a score of 9.58 on electoral process and pluralism, a score of 7.14 on function of government, a score of 7.22 on political participation, a score of 7.50 on political culture, and a score of 7.94 on civil liberties (*Economist* 2006). These scores suggest that Korean democracy is no doubt an electoral democracy but still falls short of standards of liberal democracy.

The World Bank Governance Indicators show that in 2006, Korea received positive rating in six dimensions of governance – voice and accountability, political stability, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption (Kaufman, Kraay and Mastruzzi 2007). It received the higher percentile ranking on political stability, government effectiveness and regulatory quality while middle percentile ranking on voice and equality, rule of law and control of corruption. Notable is that the scores of these indicators have lowered during the past five years: voice and accountability (from +0.63 in 1998, +0.77 in 2002 to +0.71 in 2006), rule of law (from +0.69 in 1998, +0.79 in 2002 to +0.72 in 2006) and control of corruption (from +0.07 in 1998, +0.33 in 2002 to +0.31 in 2006). Since these indicators reflect the strength of democracy and constitutionalism, those ups and downs suggest that there have been advances and setbacks in Korean democratization. Its relatively weak dimensions of democratic governance include voice and accountability, rule of law and control of corruption. It suggests that Korean democracy is an electoral democracy but still lacks some elements of liberal democracy.

Conceptualization and Measurement

In order to assess the quality of democracy from the perspectives of ordinary citizens, we need to specify the objects of attitudes. Assessment of the quality of democracy refers to evaluation of democracy in practice not democracy as an ideal. This kind of democracy assessment focuses on the supply of democratic institutions and practices. Thus, the quality of democracy needs to be distinguished from support for democracy or the demand for democratic institutions and practices (Park 2007).

Second, assessment of the quality of democracy concerns regime quality rather than government quality. A political regime consists of institutions and their justifying norms and ideals while a government refers to an incumbent (Easton 1965). Evaluation of governmental performance is often subject to partisanship, satisfaction with policy outputs and other short-term fluctuations. In contrast, evaluation of regime performance transcends over specific governmental performance. Hence, assessment of the quality of democracy involves evaluation of institutional performance rather than governmental performance.

Many scholars propose various criteria or standards of democracy by which to judge the degree of democratic progress. For instance, Robert Dahl (1971) identifies basic institutional conditions of democracy: freedom to form and join organizations, freedom of expression, right to vote, eligibility for public office, right of political leaders to compete for support, alternative sources of information, free and fair elections, and institutions for making government policies depend on votes and other expression of preferences. Mary Kaldor and Ivan Vejvoda (1997) assemble their list of formal criteria: inclusive citizenship, rule of law, separation of power, elected power-holders, free and fair elections, freedom of expression and alternative sources of information, associational autonomy, and civilian control over the security forces. Arend Lijphart (1999) proposes a set of indicators to compare the quality of democracy: women's representation, political equality, electoral participation, satisfaction with democracy, government-voter proximity, accountability and corruption. David Altman and Anival Perez-Linan (2002) propose three standards of democracy: accountability, representation, and civil liberties. Larry Diamond and Leonard Morlino (2004) identify eight dimensions on which democracy vary in quality: the rule of law, participation, competition, vertical and horizontal accountability, freedom, equality and responsiveness.

In this paper, we adopt Diamond and Morlino's list because the 206 AB Korea survey used their conceptualization and measurement of democratic quality. Yet, of their eight dimensions we choose to treat seven, that is, the rule of law, competition, participation, vertical

and horizontal accountability, freedoms, and equality. We exclude the last dimension, responsiveness, because it is not necessarily the quality of democratic governance and our measure of it may reflect governmental performance not institutional performance. It should be also noted that our measures of equality reflect social security and equality of treatment by government rather than political and legal equality and that our measures of participation do not reflect the institutional quality of inclusiveness.

Evaluations of Democratic Governance

Rule of Law

This dimension of democratic quality concerns the effectiveness of legal institutions and the functioning of law-based rule. For the last five years there have been a series of episodes weakening the rule of law. Like his predecessors, President Roh appeared to abuse the constitutional power to pardon politicians and businesspeople. He granted a special pardon to most politicians convicted of political funding fraud. He attempted to pack the Constitutional Court with his political loyalists. His failed appointment of a former justice as the head of the Constitutional Court was widely seen as illegal. Facing the unconstitutionality of his populist policies, President Roh openly expressed his frustration by ridiculing the constitution. He appeared to consider the law as an impediment to his reformist agenda. Meanwhile, he tended to use laws as “political weapons” to tame major newspapers critical to his populist agenda.

In 2003 when President Roh faced declining popularity, he announced a confidence plebiscite, whose constitutionality was later disputed before the Constitutional Court. In 2004 when the Central Election Commission ruled that the president violated his duty to uphold electoral neutrality, the president defied the ruling. Then, the National Assembly controlled by opposition parties passed an impeachment resolution, which the Constitutional Court overturn only after the ruling party won the legislative elections. President Roh’s special law on capital relocation was challenged before the Constitutional Court, which ruled as unconstitutional. In this

series of episodes, the president was widely seen as undermining the rule of law and failing to uphold the Constitution.

To ascertain how ordinary Koreans assess the rule of law, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents a pair of questions. The first question concerns equality before the law and the second the level of official law-abidingness (see Table 1). First, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “Our current courts always punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials,” three-fifths indicate equality before the law by “strongly” (25%) or “somewhat” (34%) agreeing with it. In contrast, two-fifths indicated inequality before the law by “strongly” (11%) or “somewhat” (27%) disagreeing with it. Those believing that no one is above the law outnumber those believing that the powerful are immune from punishment by a margin of 21 percentage points.

Second, when asked how often national government officials abide by the law, only one-fifth considered government officials as respectful of the law by replying “always” (2%) or “most of the time” (15%). In contrast, nearly four-fifths considered government officials as disrespectful of the law by replying “sometimes” (42%) or “rarely” (36%). Those believing that government officials do not obey laws far outnumbered those believing that government officials obey laws by a large margin of 61 percentage points. Interestingly, a majority of ordinary citizens believe that while government officials abuse power and disregard laws, they, if caught, are likely to be punished by the courts.

To determine the overall level of the rule of law, the number of affirmative responses to both questions was counted to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). Only one-tenth (9%) believed in both official law-abidingness and equality before the law while one-third (32%) believed in neither. Those scoring low levels are more than three times as many as those scoring high levels. It is striking that nine in ten ordinary Koreans expressed some degree of skepticism about the rule of law.

(Table 1 about here)

Despite anticorruption reforms for the last two decades, bribery, and abuse of power for private gains still persisted. Transparency International's corruption perception index 2006 rated Korea 42nd out of the 163 countries surveyed, lower than Singapore (5th), Japan (17th), and Taiwan (34th) (Transparency International 2006). To ascertain how ordinary Koreans assess the level of government corruption, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked a pair of questions, one on national government corruption and the other on local government corruption (see Table 1). First, when asked about the extent of corruption among national government officials, nearly half considered national official corruption common by replying "almost everyone" (11%) or "most" (34%). In contrast, another half considered national official corruption unusual by replying "hardly anyone" (1%) or "not a lot" (48%). Notable is that public assessments of national official corruption were equally divided into two opposing camps.

Second, when asked about the extent of corruption among local government officials, two-fifths considered local official corruption common by saying "almost everyone" (9%) or "most" (31%). In contrast, more than half considered local official corruption unusual by saying "hardly anyone" (3%) or "not a lot" (52%). Those considering local official corruption unusual slightly outnumbered those considering it common by a margin of 15 percentage points. Notable is that despite a growing number of local government officials prosecuted for bribery and other financial wrongdoing, local governments appear to be perceived as less corrupt than the national government.

Considering responses to the questions together, one-third (35%) considered both national and local official corruption common while nearly half (47%) considered neither common. Nonetheless, one in two ordinary Koreans turn out to consider either national or local official corruption common. In the eyes of ordinary citizens official corruption is still prevalent.

Although levels of government corruption indicate the effectiveness of the legal system, the 2006 AB Korea survey directly asked respondents to evaluate government efforts in controlling official corruption. Less than half (45%) rated government efforts positively by

replying “doing its best” (3%) or “doing something” (42%). In contrast, nearly half (48%) rated government efforts negatively by replying “not doing much” (38%) or “doing nothing” (10%). Despite a variety of institutional reforms against corruption for the last two decades, however, more ordinary people considered government efforts as inadequate or insufficient.

Competition

This dimension of democratic quality concerns the extent to which political parties or candidates compete freely and fairly in regularly held elections. It presupposes that practically all adults have the right to run for elective offices in government. Since the democratic transition, no politicians or parties have been denied their rights to compete for power. Free and fair elections are institutionally guaranteed by the independent Central Election Commission. The fact that there have been two alternations of power attests the fairness and competitiveness of electoral contests. Another fact that parties with majority legislative seats frequently changed for the last two decades also indicates high levels of competitiveness of electoral politics. It is possible to replace ruling parties through elections. Nonetheless, regionalism in electoral politics remains to constrain the extent of public contestation for power.

In 2004 after a major fundraising scandal in which the ruling and opposition parties all were implicated, the campaign finance law was substantially revised to make political funding more transparent and strict. This amendment makes business contributions to parties and campaign illegal, allows public funding for significant parties, and imposes tight accounting obligations. As a result, electoral fairness and competitiveness is enhanced and political parties are able to contest for power on more equal terms.

As mass media, especially broadcast media play a bigger role in shaping public opinion, fair and equal access to the mass media becomes critical in ensuring electoral fairness and competitiveness. Newspapers are privately owned while more influential television stations state-owned. The media are pluralistic, yet as their coverage on the impeachment vote illustrates,

television stations are government-dominated. The independent Korea Broadcasting Commission packed with the president's political loyalists failed to oversee the state-owned television stations.

To ascertain how ordinary Koreans assess competition, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents a pair of questions, one on the meaningfulness of elections and the other on equal access to mass media (see Table 2). When asked how often the elections offer the voters a real choice between different parties or candidates, nearly half considered electoral choice largely meaningful by replying "always" (19%) or "most of the time" (29%). In contrast, another half considered electoral choice largely meaningless by replying "sometimes" (34%) and "rarely" (11%). Public assessments of the meaningfulness of elections are equally divided into two opposing camps. Even though there are no bans or restrictions on political contests, popular discontent with electoral choices is considerable. This may reflect the fact that existing political parties fail to distinguish themselves from one another with distinctive programs or platforms. They look more or less the same in the eyes of voters.

The other question in the pair asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "Political parties or candidates in our country have equal access to the mass media during the election period." Two-thirds indicated equal access to mass media by agreeing with it either "strongly" (16%) or "somewhat" (51%). In contrast, three-tenths indicated unequal access to mass media by disagreeing with it either "strongly" (5%) or "somewhat" (24%). Despite a growing criticism against unfairness of broadcast media, a majority of ordinary citizens believe that political parties have equal access to mass media at least during elections. This assessment may have to do with the effective oversight of election broadcast by the independent National Election Broadcasting Debate Commission.

(Table 2 about here)

To estimate the overall level of competition, responses to the questions are combined to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). One-third (33%) considered elections as largely competitive while less than one-fifth (17%) considered elections

as largely non-competitive. Those viewing competition meaningful and fair are twice as many as those viewing it meaningless and unfair. Notable is that a plurality (49%) considered elections as partially competitive.

To ascertain how ordinary Koreans assess the competitiveness of specific elections, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents to rate the fairness of the 2004 National Assembly election, the latest national election at the time of the survey. Only about one-tenth (9%) replied that the election was not free and fair. In contrast, more than one-tenth (13%) regarded it as completely free and fair and more than two-fifths (44%) free and fair with minor problems. Notable is that one-fifth (18%) viewed the election as beset with major problems but nonetheless free and fair. Taken together, three-quarters (75%) believe that there were no major irregularities undermining the competitiveness of the election. This evaluation is consistent with assessment of the institutional quality of competition.

Participation

This quality of democracy refers to the condition that practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials. Since the democratic transition, there have been no restrictions on voting right, the key political right of citizenship. In fact, even under authoritarian rule no voting right was denied to any segments of the population based on gender or illiteracy, although voters were not free to express their preferences and not all politicians were able to run for public offices. Since the democratic transition, voters have been free to cast their ballots to reward or punish incumbents and no politicians or parties have been denied the right to run for public offices. A notable recent development is that the proportion of the population entitled to vote increased because voting age limits were lowered to age 19 from age 20 in 2005. As suffrage expands, the political space becomes more inclusive.

The most notable development for the last decade was that ordinary people began to participate in the party candidate nomination process. For instance, in the last two presidential

elections candidates of major parties were selected by a highly competitive intra-party nomination process. As political parties allowed party members and ordinary people to select candidates for public offices, the extent of popular participation in the electoral process has greatly expanded. These open primary systems also enhanced intra-party democracy.

Furthermore, electoral institutions were reformed for better representation. Since 2004 voters have cast two ballots in the national legislative elections, one for a candidate running for a district election, and the other for a party.¹ The allocation of proportional representation seats is determined by the proportion of votes obtained by each party either whose vote total meets a 3 percent threshold or whose district-seat total meets a 5 seats threshold. This system promotes the representation of multiple political parties in the legislature. For instance, this helped the Democratic Labor party to gain legislative seats in 2004.

Another notable change is that more than half of party-list candidates, especially odd-ranking candidates should be reserved for women. This change made it possible to enhance women's political participation and representation. In the 2004 election, women accounted for 13 percent of the National Assembly members, as compared to 6 percent in 2000. In the latest 2008 election, 35 women made it to the National Assembly, which accounts for 13 percent of the total seats. Most women were elected not as district candidates but as candidates of proportional representation.

The Roh government especially promoted direct citizen participation. President Roh appointed Secretary to the President for Civil Society. Nonetheless, most ordinary people remain away from civil society groups, which are often described as "citizen groups without citizens." Yet, for the last five years pro-government social group members have been mobilized for political participation through information and communication technology such as the Internet and mobile phones.

¹ The legislative electoral system is a single member plurality with a party list-based proportional representation. Currently, 245 National Assembly seats are chosen by first-past-the-post voting in single-member districts and 54 seats selected by party-list voting according to proportional representation.

To ascertain how much ordinary Koreans are involved in the political process, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents a series of questions concerning electoral and non-electoral participation (see Table 3). First, two-thirds (68%) said that they voted in the 2004 legislative elections, one-fifth (21%) reported that they attended a campaign meeting or rally, and less than one-fifth (17%) replied that they persuaded others to vote for a particular candidate or party.

(Table 3 about here)

Second, when asked how many times they have done some non-electoral political actions in the past three years, three-tenths (30%) said that they had contacted government officials, one-tenth (11%) replied that they had contacted elected officials or legislative representatives, one-tenth (10%) said that they had contacted officials of political parties or other political organizations, and more than one-tenth (13%) said that they had contacted representatives of non-governmental or civil society organizations.

These findings show that levels of electoral participation except voting remains limited. Furthermore, levels of non-electoral participation such as contacting are largely meager. Notable is that contacting civil society activists is far less popular than contacting government officials. Ordinary citizens rarely ask civil society groups to represent their interests. It may indicate ineffectiveness of institutions of social accountability. Lower levels of participation do not necessarily mean that all citizens are institutionally unable to vote or petition for representing their interests. Nonetheless, limited citizen participation may indicate poor quality of political institutions and processes.

Vertical Accountability

This dimension of democratic quality concerns the extent to which voters hold government leaders accountable to their political decisions. This type of accountability runs from citizens to government leaders. Since the democratic transition, there have been two inter-party alternations of power, one through the 1997 election and the other through the 2007 election. This

attests the effectiveness of institutions of vertical accountability. This proves that the Korean people can change a government through elections. Yet, in off-years between elections they are seen less effective in holding government leaders accountable. The most notable feature of the last three civilian governments is that presidents often disregarded the views of the majority as if they had a popular mandate.

Since the democratic transition, there have been frequent party reshuffles, and party break-up and formation. Electoral contests have often centered less on policies and programs than on personalities. Regionalism in electoral politics tends to prevent voters from punishing the party in power if it represents their region. These characteristics of Korean politics appear to constrain the effectiveness of institutions of vertical accountability.

Since the National Election Broadcasting Debate Commission oversees the broadcasting of electoral debates, access to mass media is considered as equal and fair. Despite the oversight of the independent Korea Broadcasting Commission, however, state-controlled television stations have been criticized as biased in their coverage on government and politics, especially for the last five years. The Roh government attempted to tame print media, especially independent and critical newspapers. In these circumstances social instruments such as broadcast media remain less effective in promoting vertical accountability.

The Information Disclosure Law gives citizens the right to inspect government records and documents. Although it allows many exceptions, nonetheless, the government is under pressure to permit the public to have access to records and to keep the public informed. The recent expansion of E-governance also enhanced government transparency. The public can have access to information on government finance, procurement and contracting, which is posted on the Internet. The government becomes more accessible and transparent.

A notable development for the five years is political activation of civil society groups. President Roh named his government “participatory government” and appointed Secretary to the President for Civil Society. The Roh government actively mobilized and activated left-leaning

civil society groups for his populist reforms. In doing so, President Roh styled himself as a champion of vertical accountability, especially through pro-government social groups. Yet, political activation of left-leaning social groups brought about the corresponding activation of conservative forces. As the government appeared to listen to only those voices of left-leaning social groups, it was criticized as partially accountable. The Roh government was cynically called a “participatory government without participation.” By promoting mass democracy largely through the Internet while bypassing representative institutions, the Roh government encouraged direct citizen participation, which resulted in more political instability and volatility.

To ascertain how ordinary Koreans assess vertical accountability, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents a series of questions (see Table 4). First, when asked how often the government withholds information from the public view, seven-tenths indicated opacity of government activities by replying three-tenths (29%) replied “always” (29%) or “most of the time” (41%). In contrast, only a quarter indicated transparency of government activities by replying “sometimes” (22%) or “rarely” (3%). Despite the Information Disclosure Law the government is seen as failing to keep ordinary citizens informed about their decisions and to justify their decisions, which Andreas Schedler (1999) regarded as key features of vertical accountability.

(Table 4 about here)

The essence of vertical accountability is that people have power to reward or punish government leaders. Elections are the ultimate method by which ordinary citizens hold the government accountable to its decisions. To improve vertical accountability, however, people should be able to monitor the government and to demand justification for its decisions even between elections. When asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “Between elections the people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions,” more than half indicated unavailability of non-electoral methods by agreeing with it either “strongly” (12%) or “somewhat” (44%). In contrast, about one-third indicated availability of non-electoral

methods by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (5%) or “somewhat” (30%). The ongoing process of holding government leaders to account for their decisions is inadequate and limited in the eyes of many ordinary citizens.

When asked whether they agree or disagree the statement “People have the power to change a government they do not like,” more than two-fifths indicated the efficacy of popular punishment by agreeing with it either “strongly” (6%) or “somewhat” (38%). In contrast, nearly half indicated the inefficacy of popular punishment by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (13%) or “somewhat” (37%). Public assessments of the efficacy of popular punishment are equally divided into two opposing camps. Perhaps one of the reasons why popular punishment is regarded as limited may be related to the old politics of regionalism in which regional identification rather than governmental performance determines electoral choices.

To determine the overall level of vertical accountability, responses to the last two questions are combined together to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). Less than one-fifth (16%) considered non-electoral methods as available and popular punishment as effectual. In contrast, one-third (33%) considered non-electoral methods as unavailable and popular punishment as ineffectual. Those judging the supply of vertical accountability inadequate are twice as many as those judging the supply adequate.

Horizontal Accountability

This dimension of democratic quality concerns the effectiveness of institutional checks and balances (Schedler, Diamond and Plattner 1999). One of the most notable features of democratization is the supply of institutions of horizontal accountability. The power of the executive over other branches of government has been reduced substantially. The National Assembly is no longer a rubber-stamp institution and the judiciary becomes increasingly independent. The National Assembly has often been controlled by opposition parties and divided government has been a general pattern, not an exception. The relationship between the legislative

and executive branches comes to reflect institutional checks and balances. As the 2004 impeachment vote against the president illustrates, the balance of power between these two branches has been restored. The National Assembly becomes active in overseeing state agencies as well as in making laws.

There are other political institutions of horizontal accountability such as the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the Board of Audit and Inspection. Yet, even civilian presidents often attempted to pack these institutions with their political supporters and loyalists. The Board of Audit and Inspection, a constitutional institution, inspects accounts of government ministries and agencies and evaluates their performance. Yet it is under the president, not the National Assembly. Hence, despite its constitutional status, the Board is not a robust institution of horizontal accountability. During the last five years the Constitutional Court, the supreme power of judicial review, played an increasingly critical role in defending the Constitution and improving the rule of law. It proved to be effective as an institution of horizontal accountability.

There are some other institutions of horizontal accountability such as the Central Election Commission, the Ombudsman, the National Human Rights Commission, and the Independent Commission against Corruption.² The Independent Commission against Corruption was established in 2002. Yet, this commission and the Ombudsman lacked the power to prosecute public officials who violated the ethics laws. Despite these complementary institutions of horizontal accountability, political practices associated with “an imperial presidency” have not been completely abolished.

To ascertain how ordinary citizens assess horizontal accountability, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked a pair of questions concerning institutional checks and balances (see Table 5). First, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “When the government breaks the

² In February 2008, the Anti-corruption and Civil Rights Commission was established by merging three agencies - the Ombudsman of Korea, the Korea Independent Commission against Corruption, and the Administrative Appeals Commission. The integration of these institutions into one eliminates overlapping authority, but weakens horizontal accountability.

laws, there is nothing the legal system can do,” nearly half indicated the inefficacy of judicial reviews by agreeing with it either “strongly” (11%) or “somewhat” (37%). In contrast, more than two-fifths indicated the efficacy of judicial reviews by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (7%) or “somewhat” (37%). Public assessments of judicial control over the executive are equally divided into two opposing camps. This finding suggests that the power of the independent judiciary is limited in the eyes of many ordinary citizens.

(Table 5 about here)

When asked about the National Assembly’s capability to control the executive, more than half indicated the efficacy of legislative oversight by replying either “very capable” (12%) or “capable” (41%). In contrast, two-fifths indicated the inefficacy of legislative oversight by choosing either “not capable” (31%) or “not at all capable” (7%). Those considering the National Assembly as largely capable outnumbered those considering it as largely incapable by a margin of 15 percentage points. A majority of ordinary citizens no longer regard the National Assembly as a rubber stamp for the executive. The legislative branch is viewed as an effective institution of horizontal accountability.

To determine the overall level of horizontal accountability, responses to the two questions are combined together to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). A quarter (25%) considered institutional checks and balances as largely effective while another quarter (25%) considered them as largely ineffective. Despite institutional democratization of the last two decades, institutional checks and balances still remain far short of standards of limited government.

Freedom

This dimension of democratic quality concerns the extent to which political and civil rights are guaranteed. One of the notable institutional reforms for improving this democratic quality was the establishment of the National Human Right Commission. The holding of free and

fair legislative election in 2004 following an impeachment vote attests the protection of political rights. Yet, there are still some areas of concerns. For instance, International Amnesty continues to urge the Korean government to abolish the National Security Law and to improve civil rights of foreign workers as well as social rights of irregular workers. The 1948 National Security Law is the product of South Korea's relations with North Korea. Under authoritarian rule this law had been used to suppress political dissent. Despite two decades of democratization there emerged no consensus on the abolition of the law, which is regarded as a potential encroachment on civil rights.

One of the most serious challenges to civil rights for the last five years was the Roh government's legislation of the Newspaper Law and the Press Arbitration Law. The Newspaper Law was intended to limit the size and editorial independence of newspapers. Some measures of the law were later struck down as unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court in 2006. The Press Arbitration Law was intended to make it easier to sue newspaper on infringement of the interests of the state and individual citizens, which was viewed as a serious threat to the freedom of expression. The Korea Broadcasting Commission is an independent commission. Yet, President Roh appointed his political supporters its commissioners, which contributed to the failure of fairly monitoring and overseeing broadcast media.

To ascertain how ordinary citizens assess freedom, the 2006 AB Korea survey asked respondents a pair of questions concerning freedoms of speech and association (see Table 6). These civil rights are essential for procedural democracy. First, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement "People are free to speak what they think without fear," nearly three-fifths viewed freedom of speech protected by agreeing with it either "strongly" (9%) or "somewhat" (48%). In contrast, two-fifths viewed freedom of speech infringed by disagreeing with it either "strongly" (8%) or "somewhat" (32%). A majority of ordinary citizens appear to enjoy freedom of expression.

(Table 6 about here)

Second, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement, “People can join any organization they like without fear,” two-thirds considered freedom of association guaranteed by agreeing with it either “strongly” (10%) or “somewhat” (54%). In contrast, three-tenths considered freedom of associations limited by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (5%) or “somewhat” (25%). A larger majority of ordinary citizens appear to enjoy freedom of association.

Notable is that those enjoying freedom of association are more numerous than those enjoying freedom of expression. This may have to do with the fact that the Roh government attempted to tame opposition newspapers and threatened journalists with criminal libel laws, and filed civil defamation suits against newspapers.

To determine the overall level of civil rights, responses to the two questions are combined together to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). A half (51%) considered both civil rights guaranteed while a quarter (27%) considered both infringed. Those considering both civil rights guaranteed are nearly twice as many as those considering both infringed. Nonetheless, it should be noted that half of ordinary citizens viewed the supply of key civil rights inadequate.

Equality

In this study, this dimension of democratic quality concerns social security and equality of treatment rather than political and legal equality associated with procedural democracy. Despite that a welfare state is a basic principle of the constitution, there is less protection of social rights than political and civil rights. In the wake of the 1997 economic crisis, the public assistance program expanded to address social problems including poverty. In 1999 the old Livelihood Protection Law was replaced by the Basic Livelihood Guarantee Law, which is the key element of Korea’s social welfare system. The law includes various types of public assistance such as livelihood aid, housing aid, medical aid, and educational aid and lifts demographic eligibility criteria to assist anyone in poverty. The law strengthens the social safety net in Korea.

The constitution provides for equal treatment of all citizens. No groups of citizens receive preferential treatment in property ownership, higher education, and public service jobs. The major exception is women who continue to face social discrimination. In 2005, however, the Supreme Court granted married women equal property rights with men concerning the inheritance of property owned by family clans. This historic ruling is regarded as a turning-point for improving gender equality in male-dominated Korean society.

To ascertain how ordinary citizens assess equality, the 2006 AB survey asked a pair of questions, one for equal treatment by government and the other for the protection of basic livelihood (see Table 7). First, when asked whether they agree or disagree with the statement “Everyone is treated equally by the government,” four-fifths indicated inequality of treatment by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (28%) or “somewhat” (56%). In contrast, only one-tenth indicated equality of treatment by agreeing with it either “strongly” (1%) or “somewhat” (12%). Those considering governmental treatment unequal far outnumbered those considering it equal by a large margin of 70 percentage points. This finding suggests that a belief in inequality of treatment by government is prevalent.

(Table 7 about here)

Second, when asked whether or not they agree with the statement “People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter,” two-thirds indicated little protection of basic livelihood by disagreeing with it either “strongly” (17%) or “somewhat” (50%). In contrast, three-tenths indicated protection of basic livelihood by agreeing with it either “strongly” (1%) or “somewhat” (28%). Those seeing the social safety net inadequate far outnumbered those seeing it adequate by a considerable margin of 38 percentage points. A majority of ordinary Koreans believe that not everyone is provided with adequate public assistance for basic livelihood.

To determine the overall level of equality, responses to the two questions are combined together to construct an index whose values range from 0 (low) to 2 (high) (see Table 8). Only one-tenth (9%) considered equality as protected while two-thirds (65%) considered neither as

protected. Notable is that nine in ten Koreans considered either equality of treatment or social security dissatisfying. Equal worth and dignity of all citizens is adequately guaranteed in the eyes of ordinary Koreans.

Summary of Democratic Quality

Table 8 shows a summary of assessment of each dimension of democratic quality. We exclude participation because its measures do not reflect institutional quality. As PDI values indicate, the supply of equality (-55.9) is greatly inadequate in Korean democracy. The supply of either the rule of law (-22.8) or vertical accountability (-17.4) is relatively inadequate. In contrast, the supply of either freedom (+23.8) or competition (+15.5) is relatively adequate. Yet, the supply of horizontal accountability (+0.6) is neither inadequate nor adequate.

(Table 8 about here)

Figure 1 similarly shows the extent to which each procedural dimension of democratic quality is present. We exclude equality because its measures reflect more institutional and governmental outcomes than procedural quality of institutions. The rule of law is most lacking in Korean democracy. Both types of accountability are moderately lacking. In contrast, civil rights such as freedom of expression and freedom of association as well as competition such as electoral competitiveness are least lacking. Overall, Korean democracy is more deficient in supplying the rule of law, and vertical and vertical accountability than competitiveness of electoral contests and basic civil rights associated with public contestation for power. This suggests that political institutions and practices associated with liberal or representative democracy are greatly dissatisfying while those associated with electoral democracy relatively satisfying (Park 2007).

(Figure 1 about here)

Conclusion

In this paper we examine how ordinary Koreans assess the quality of their democracy. We consider democratic quality as regime quality rather than government quality. Hence, we try to focus on institutional performance rather than governmental performance. As theoretical and empirical studies on democracy assessments emphasize, we assume that democratic quality is multidimensional. Many scholars and researchers of democracy identify different criteria or standards of democracy. We choose seven dimensions of democratic quality such as the rule of law, competition, participation, vertical and horizontal accountability, freedom, and equality while emphasizing those procedural dimensions of democratic institutional quality.

Analysis of the 2006 AB Korea survey evidently reveals that public assessment of quality varies from one dimension to another. We found that the rule of law and vertical accountability are most lacking while freedom and competition least lacking in Korean democracy. No doubt Korean democracy is a competitive electoral democracy in the eyes of ordinary citizens. This finding is consistent with the characterization of Korean democracy with universal suffrage, free and fair elections, and multiparty competition and alternation of parties in power. Despite institutional democratization of the last two decades, however, Korea is suffering from official corruption, and abuse or arbitrary use of power. Korean democracy is weak in the law-based rule, and political accountability. It seems that improving the quality of democracy in Korea requires the development of a *Rechtsstaat*, a state that governs according to the rule of law. Without effective institutions of accountability, Korean democracy may degenerate into a “delegative” or an illiberal populist democracy.

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Table 1 Rule of Law: Law-based rule and government corruption

	Percentage of those saying
Our courts always punish the guilty even if they are high-ranking officials	59.5
National government officials always or most of the time abide by the law	17.0
Almost or most officials in the national government are corrupt	45.2
Almost or most officials in local governments are corrupt	40.3

N=1,212

Table 2 Competition: Fairness and competitiveness of electoral politics

	Percentage of those saying
Political parties or candidates in our country have equal access to the mass media during the election period	66.3
Our elections always or most of the time offer the voters a real choice between different parties or candidates	47.3

N=1,212

Table 3 Participation: Electoral and non-electoral

	Percentage of those saying
Voted in the 2004 legislative election	68.2
Attended a campaign meeting or rally	21.0
Persuaded others to vote for a certain candidate or party	16.9
Have contacted government officials in the past three years	30.4
Have contacted elected officials or legislative representatives	11.0
Have contacted officials of political parties	9.7
Have contacted representatives of civil society organizations	13.0

N=1,212

Table 4 Vertical accountability: Information and punishment

	Percentage of those saying
Government officials rarely or occasionally withhold important information from the public view	24.6
People have the power to change a government they don't like	44.1
Between elections, the people have no way of holding the government responsible for its actions (Disagree)	35.7

N=1,212

Table 5 Horizontal accountability: Institutional checks and balances

	Percentage of those saying
The legislature is very capable or capable of keeping the government in check	52.9
When the government breaks the laws, there is nothing the legal system can do (Disagree)	43.3

N=1,212

Table 6 Freedom: Expression and association

	Percentage of those saying
People are free to speak what they think without fear	56.5
People can join any organization they like without fear	64.3

N=1,212

Table 7 Equality: Social security and equality of treatment

	Percentage of those saying
People have basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter	29.2
Everyone is treated equally by the government	13.0

N=1,212

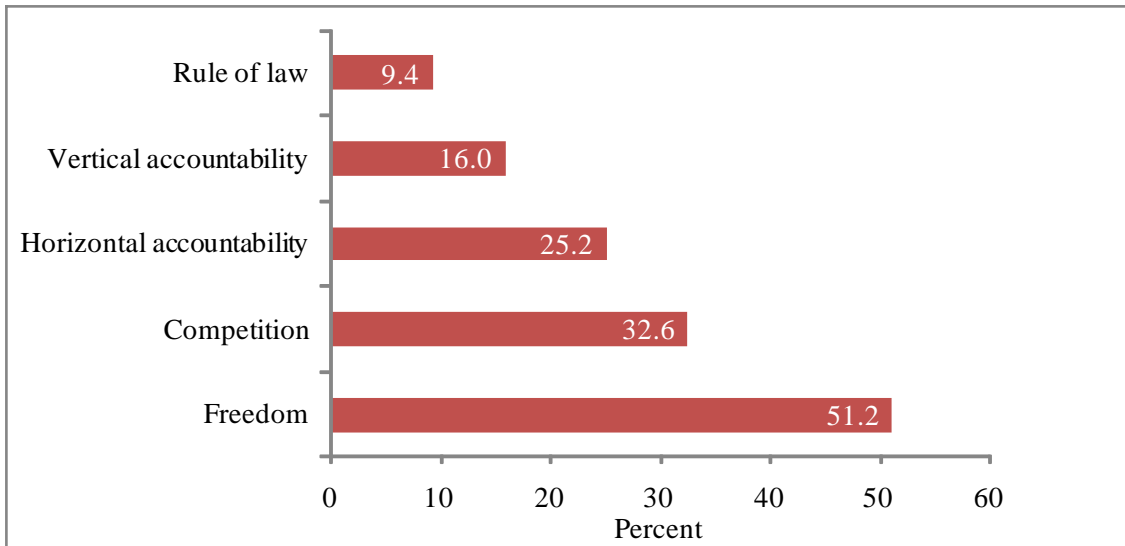
Table 8 Assessment of dimensions of democratic quality

	Low	Medium	High	NA	PDI
Rule of law	32.2	57.8	9.4	0.7	-22.8
Competition	17.1	48.5	32.6	1.8	+15.5
Vertical accountability	33.4	47.8	16.0	2.8	-17.4
Horizontal Accountability	24.6	45.9	25.2	4.4	+0.6
Freedom	27.4	18.3	51.2	3.1	+23.8
Equality	64.5	25.0	8.6	1.9	-55.9

PDI = percentage of high – percentage of low.

N=1,212

Figure 1 Assessment of procedural dimensions of democratic quality



N=1,212