

Richard Haddock: Welcome to the East Asia Hotspots podcast, where we invite you to join us for chats with experts and scholars from around the world to talk about contemporary issues in East Asia. I'm the lead facilitator, [Richard Haddock 00:00:17] with the George Washington University. Support of this podcast comes from the US Department of Education's title six grant for East Asian studies at the George Washington University's Elliot School of International Affairs. Our partners at the Elliot School that help make this podcast happen are the Sigur Center for Asian studies and the GW Institute for Korean studies. The views and expressed in these podcasts are those of the speakers alone and do not reflect the position of the NRC. Through these podcasts, we want to encourage dialogue about diverse perspectives in East Asian studies. Check on our website at nrc.elliott.gwu.edu for all our podcast episodes and info about East Asian studies at the George Washington University. Now, let's start the conversation.

Welcome, listeners, to another episode of the East Asia Hotspots podcast. I'm Richard Haddock here with another very special guest, Professor Gi-Wook Shin, who's the director of the Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, the William J. Perry professor of Contemporary Korea, the founding director of the Korea program, which by the way, celebrates its 20th anniversary this May, a senior fellow of the Freeman Spogli Institute for international studies and a professor of sociology all at Stanford University.

As a historical comparative and political sociologist, his research has concentrated on social movements, nationalism, development, and international relations. Dr. Shin is the author editor of more than 20 books and numerous articles. His recent books include the North Korean Conundrum, Balancing Human Rights and Nuclear Security, and Demographics and Innovation in the Asian Pacific. He has a forthcoming book edited with Ho-Ki Kim on South Korea's democracy in crisis, the threats of the liberalism, populism and polarization. Dr. Shin is now working on a new research initiative seeking to examine potential benefits of talent flows in the Asia Pacific region, where countries, cities and corporations have competed with one another to enhance their stock of brain power. Dr. Shin, welcome to the podcast.

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: Thank you for having me here.

Richard Haddock: Diving in, we want to talk about South Korea's democracy, in particular democratic decay. Your forthcoming book and your 2020 article on democratic decay explores several internal and external threats to democratic processes, values and society in South Korea. Could you give us an overview of what is democratic decay and how it plays out in the South Korean context? Who are the main players involved and what is the extent to which you see democratic decay across the region?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: Thank you again for having me to talk about this important and timely issue. I have had many ties with GW, and it's my real pleasure to be here today with

you. To go back to March of 2017, about this time five years ago, at the time, President Park Geun-hye was impeached on the charge of power abuse. The first time for Korea, they had any president impeached. And then, Korea had a snap election. They elected Moon Jae-in as new president. And there was a political crisis after impeachment. But then, with the Moon Jae-in, many people, including myself, had high expectation for him and his people to restore or even upgrade Korean democracy. After all, Moon Jae-in was a human rights lawyer, and he had a palace experience as a major palace advisor to late President Roh Moo-hyun in early 2000.

Unfortunately, what we saw once he's in power didn't go as well as we expected. On the contrary, it went the opposite way. And in his inauguration speech, Moon Jae-in promised equal opportunities, fair process and just outcomes. However, he and his people defined his regime as sort of a social revolution and acted in such a way. Especially what really disappointed me the most was that they were demonizing and punishing the opponent as evil. And certainly, Korea was a democratic country, but then, under the load of law, a lot of democratic norms and practices were being undermined. So, about three years ago, I begun to speak out that Korean democracy was not advancing, but rather, back sliding. That's why I wrote a major article in Korean monthly magazine, and then, a revised expanded into an article at [inaudible 00:05:58] democracy. And then, organize conference and producing a book that you just mentioned with my long-term friend and colleague, [Kim Ho-Ki 00:06:08], from [inaudible 00:06:10] University.

As our subtitles of the book indicate, we identify the three main threat to Korean democracy. They can explain democratic decay. One is illiberalism. Certainly, Korea is a democratic country, but I'm not sure whether it is a liberal democracy. At best, it may be a moderatarian rule. There is much respect for different views, and certainly, a leg of mutual tolerance. Probably some of you know quite well on book by Yascha Mounk, The People Versus Democracy. There, he talked about illiberal democracy. And I think Korea are certainly showing characteristics of illiberal democracy.

The other one, populism. Moon Jae-in government took really anti-establishment stance. And once again, under the rhetoric, they were demonizing and attacking the opponent as evil. And they led a very long campaign to eradicate a deep-rooted evil. And they even established committees for almost all ministry to identify those evil and punish. Third, as a result, Korea society has become highly polarized by generation, by gender, by ideology. It's just basically us versus them. It's very hard to engage any rational discussions. In our country, we say that, "We agree to disagree," but I don't think that's happening in Korea. And especially, what is really unusual for Korea is that democratic norms and practices, they were undermined by formal democratic activists. They were good at fighting for democracy, but certainly, not at practicing democracy. So, this is like over background, why I was arguing

that Korean democracy is back sliding, why I have a lot of concerns about the future of Korean democracy.

Richard Haddock: Thank you for that. And actually, tying into the last point on polarization and turning to the recent presidential elections, it was an incredibly close race that reflects a divided country. According to polls, 48.56% of ballots went to the conservative candidate, now, President Elect Yoon Suk-yeol and his rival, Lee Jae-myung, of the ruling democratic... Well, what's really democratic party, garnered 47.83%. The race itself was marked by scandals, negative campaigns, corruption charges, personal rumors on top of other urgent policy issues, such as domestic housing, the pandemic, global security issues. In your view, how has democratic decay played out in this election and exacerbated these three elements you mentioned about illiberalism, populism, and polarization?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: I think what you saw in this election really illustrates Korean democracy in crisis. As you mentioned, the campaign was highly negative. There wasn't much discussion about major policy issues. Korea has having a lot of challenges. So, basically, since there are with COVID-19 in a housing price and economic inequalities in terms of foreign policy, alliance, relations with Japan, North Korea, China, and so on. But there wasn't much discussion about those policy issues. But rather, both sides, both Lee and Yoon, they engage in a highly negative campaign attacking not only the candidate, but also, family members. Some of you maybe following a Korean election, and you may notice that a spouse of neither Lee or Yoon joined the campaign. They made apology and basically disappeared from the campaign. I haven't seen that in any democratic society or in democratic in Korea, in the past.

So, I think for me, this election in Korea reminds me of US election in this country in 2020. You may remember that there wasn't really much discussion about policy, but whether are you for Trump or anything but Trump? We know that Biden was able to lead the coalition of anti-Trump forces and won the election. I think what happened in Korea was very similar. Yoon Suk-yeol, he entered politics only last summer. He was a Korea prosecutor, and actually, he was appointed by President Moon Jae-in as prosecutor general. But then, he led a coalition of anti-Moon, or anti-Lee, anti-democratic party in a forces and won with a very thin margin.

Basically, during in a campaign, the main line of debate was, do you want a regime change or you want it to continue? Once again, there's no other major debates or discussion on policy issues. So, that's why when I began to speak out about democratic decay three years ago, I warned that unless Korea can improve democratic norms and spirits and Korean democracy will continue to back slide. At the time, I said that it's almost like a light drizzle that soaks you before even you notice. So, probably three years, it's almost like a light drizzle, but I feel like during election, that light drizzle has become almost like a shower. And I think now, Korean democracy is really underlying.

Richard Haddock: What impact will this recent presidential election have on the health of democracy within South Korea, to expand on the point you just made, with domestic sociopolitical issues, including gender equality, housing access, economic and educational opportunities? Can we expect more back sliding? Or what would it take to encourage democratic rebuilding?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: I think that really depends on how now, Mr. Yoon can bring a national unity and how in his regime and operation party, the democratic party, who actually controls the national assembly, they can work together. Because once again, Korean societies are highly divided, are really divided. And then, once again, our position controls the national assembly. So, it's easy to expect are more tensions and fighting between both sides, even after Mr. Yoon takes office.

But at the same time, I like to mention maybe like three good news from this election. One is unlike in this country in 2020, Mr. Lee Jae-myung, he conceded his defeat immediately without leaving any doubt on the outcome of the election. I think that's a very positive sign. The second one, and you may know, the opposition party, they really kind of promoting identity politics, especially anti-feminism that was really disturbing, but it didn't really work out. So, I'm very glad to see that that strategy didn't work out. I think that's the good news.

Third one, Yoon Suk-yeol, President Elect, he has no political depth because he is a political novice. So, some people may say he doesn't have any political experience. There might be he's a liability. At the same time, he can carry out real democratic reform if it really wanted to do. And also, this election, actually, I think sent in a very clear warning message to both sides. As you talked about, the margin was very thin. It's less than 1%. It's the only over little bit of 200,000 votes.

In my view, that means that sure, Korean voters, they supported [inaudible 00:15:43] regime change. They wanted to make a strong signal to the ruling party that you really haven't fulfilled promise or the mandate to reform and upgrade current democracy. But at the same time, I think it's a warning to new governments, unless you perform in democratic way, then you may lose again five years later. So, in the democratic era, until now, usually either progressive or conservative, they stay in power for 10 years, to president. Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, and then, Kim Dae-jung, and then, Roh Moo-hyun, and then, Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye. But this time, democracy party, the progressive, they will be leaving power only after five years. So, in my view, Korean voters sent a very clear warning to both sides, so that I hope that both ruling and the position conservative and progressive, they can work together to save Korean democracy.

Richard Haddock: One of the ongoing issues in politics around the world is the COVID-19 pandemic. South Korea implemented strong pandemic control mechanisms developed in part by previous experience addressing the 2003 SARS and 2015 MERS outbreaks. However, more recently, South Korea is experiencing an

upsurge in COVID cases. I'm wondering if you saw how the ongoing pandemic might have affected democratic governance in South Korea in general and how that came across also in the recent presidential elections?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: As you know, Korea was very good in containing virus. And I think Korea had very low death compared to other country. And about two years ago, actually, government performance in handling COVID-19 that worked in favor of the ruling party. That's one reason why they were able to win over opposition. And this time, also, Korea election proceeded quite commercially even with the surging number of COVID-19. But the same time, a lot of people, especially small to medium business in Korea, they are a major component of the Korean economy. They suffered a lot.

And also, even though Korean government was effective in containing the virus, a lot of citizens, they had to sacrifice their privacy. They had to compromise. So, I think this COVID-19 still ongoing issue in Korea. It's not over yet. And when the new government comes in, I think they will focus more on the Beijing side and try to recover Korean economy from the pandemic. It's my understanding that there will be special committee within the transition team to deal with COVID-19. So, once again, overall, I feel like Korea has been able to handle it pretty well. At the same time, at the expense of privacy as a multi-medium business and the new government really have to make more balance and has to recover Korean economy from the pandemic.

Richard Haddock: Are global element of geopolitics, but also, the elections here is foreign policy. And foreign policy continues to be a hotly-debated issue in South Korea. Actually, some of your more recent work looks at public opinion polls and public sentiment in South Korea regarding the United States, and China, Japan and others. How has foreign policy, and then, security issues such as South Korea's relations with the US, China, and also, North Korea affected or played into this recent election?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: At this time, foreign policy wasn't much an issue. In the past, probably like in North Korea has been important issue. And this time, North Korea wasn't much an issue during campaign. Maybe know, Koreans are so used to North Korean challenge. And as you know, North Korea kept testing missiles during campaign, but it wasn't much an issue. But rather, one thing I notice, as you mentioned, is the rise of anti-China sentiment. During winter Olympics are in Beijing, there's some controversy over Korean traditional costume, hanbok, or some other issue. And then, the Korean public turned very negative against China. And both leading candidate Lee and Yoon joined the critical chorus in condemning China.

And in our survey, in other survey, now, Korean's negative view of China actually is higher than Korean negative view of Japan. That's very unusual because anti-Japanese sentiment has been always higher than any other view of other countries. So, probably, anti-trust sentiment has made some impacts on the election. But I think that will be a major policy challenge for the new

government in my view. Because now, election is over, and now, you have to deal with reality because China still very important for Korea or South Korea as a major economic partner. So, you can't really ignore or downplay the importance of China to South Korea.

But at the same time, the public sentiment is highly negative against China. And you have to address public sentiment into your policy and politics and ongoing tension between US and China. There will be a growing pressure for South Korea to take the side. Until now, Korea has been maintaining strategic ambiguity. So, they saying United State for security, China for economy. But that paradigm may not be working anymore. So, in my view, dealing with China will be a major policy challenge for new South Korean government.

Richard Haddock: Another major geopolitical issue right now that's capturing global attention is the Ukraine crisis. And President Elect Yoon said at a presidential debate last month that as we have seen in Ukraine, a country's national security and peace cannot be protected by paper and ink. How do you see the Ukraine crisis factoring in or developing in political discourse in Korea? And does that prioritize or give certain urgency to security issues?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: I think that's a very good question. And I think in my view, the impact of Korean crisis and Korean security policy is rather indirect. I don't think many Korean people really understand what is going on in Ukraine. It's a little far away from their country. I think there are two points they may have some merits to consider. One is this Ukraine crisis confirm their belief held by many Korean people whether China and Russia, they are authoritarian and cannot be trusted. So, they might amplify or reinforce anti-China or anti-Russia sentiment in Korea. Secondly, they may also confirm the importance of the alliance with the United States. And the new government will emphasize more on the alliance with the United States. So, I think overall, the Ukraine crisis may mean that Korea will be closer to the United States, maybe a little away from China and or Russia.

Richard Haddock: Just to round us out before we start to conclude the conversation and going back to our earlier part about democratic decay, what do you see as the state of democracies in the region? Curious to hear your thoughts on this because South Korea, and Taiwan and others in the region have spent much of the second half of the 20th century undergoing democratic transformation for periods of authoritarian suppression, and seeing where democracies are now, whether some are back sliding or leaning forward in certain directions. What's your overall take about the state of democracies in the region?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: A lot of people, including my colleague at Stanford, they've been talking about sort of democratic depression globally. In my article, I've been saying that Korea is not exception. And following this global ties of democratic erosion. And especially maybe in Asia, you can see rise of nationalism in China, in Japan, and also back sliding of democracy in the Philippines, in India and so on. So, certainly, I've been studying Korea for a long time, then I'm very critical of

Korea. But Korea may not be only exception. I study Korea, I grew up in Korea. I live in the United States for a long time. Right now, I see a lot of parallel between Korea and the United States in terms of undermining democratic norms and spirits, and then, polarization of Korean and American society. So, certainly, it's important to understand Korea from more comparative or global perspective.

Richard Haddock: That's a great actually segue to our last question or topic, which is for those who like to learn more about democratic development, decay or depression in South Korea and in other places worldwide, do you have recommendations on related resources, organizations or opportunities?

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: Let me say what we have been doing at Stanford because my argument is not really new. Because at Stanford, we learned Korean democracy project for a long time. And actually, some of my graduate students wrote dissertation actually based on data collected through Korean democracy project. And we had a grant from Korean Academy of Korean Studies to publish six books on Korean democracy. And I was main editor of the series. And also, as you mentioned, [Notebook 00:27:33] will be coming out next month, addressing the main threat to Korean democracy and how we can address those threats to advance Korean democracy. So, I think if you are really interested more on Korean democracy, its origins, or evolution or challenges, you can come to our website.

And one thing I like to mention is that I will be writing an article how for major Korean monthly magazine. And I like to address some main discourse on Korea. And we plan to translate, get that into English. Some of points I address today will be written also through the venue. And my final point is that during this election, I had a lot of interviews with Western media. One thing I thought very interesting was that many European kind of liberal magazines like [inaudible 00:28:40] of Germany or news statements of UK and [inaudible 00:28:45], they contact me for interview. So, certainly, they are really paying attention to the status and the future of Korean democracy.

Once again, I have a lot of concern with the current state of Korean democracy. And I've been quite critical because I care about Korea a lot. Because once again, I was born and grew up in Korea. I really wanted to advance or help to advance Korean democracy. I've been very critical of the Moon Jae-in regime, but it wasn't really political or partisan critique. I will be also taking a critical review of the new government. So, if they don't work to advance Korean democracy, I will be sharing my critical voice as well. I think in conclusion, Korea has to achieve a lot. But at the same time, I feel that Korean democracy is on the line, and we have pay close attention to that. And then, as I [inaudible 00:29:53] lecture, we have to make a critical voice.

Richard Haddock: That's an excellent way to round out our interview. Thanks so much, Dr. Shin, for your excellent analysis, sometimes sobering remarks about the state of

democracy, but also, lights of optimism in places where we can dig in and rebuild. So, thank you so much for joining us for our interview, and we'd love to have you back anytime.

Dr. Gi-Wook Shi...: Thank you.

Richard Haddock: Thank you for listening in to our podcast episode. For more information about this episode and all our other episodes, be sure to check out our website at nrc.elliott.gwu.edu. And subscribe to our email list to get the latest on upcoming episodes. If you have a recommendation on a topic or expert to interview for a future podcast episode, please send us your ideas via email to gweanrc@gwu.edu. Lastly, we'd like to thank our sponsors for all their support in making this podcast happen. But most importantly, we want to thank you, the listener, for tuning in. Until next time.