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How do Governments Lose Legitimacy Among young People? — A Case Study of University Students in the Gwangju Uprising in the 1980s

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Abstract. In the late 1970s, South Korea's rapid economic growth was accompanied by growing social stratification, putting the "performance legitimacy" of its traditional authoritarian regime under strain. This article takes the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising as its starting point to examine how youth groups emerged as challengers to the political legitimacy of South Korea's authoritarian government. Drawing on historical documents and third-party archival summaries, this study uses case study analysis and incorporates Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory to analyze how economic inequality and campus mobilization mechanisms amid expanding higher education reshaped young people's demands. The research demonstrates that the upgrading of youth aspirations, combined with the expansion of higher education, which facilitated organized mobilization among low-income groups such as workers and farmers—facilitated by the expansion of higher education, jointly undermined the economic foundations of authoritarian rule. These findings offer significant insights into the structural origins of contemporary social movements.

Keywords: Youth, Social Movements, Political Legitimacy, Democratization in South Korea

1. Introduction

By the late 1970s, South Korea had built strong legitimacy rooted in its "Miracle on the Han River," yet rapid economic growth, accompanied by sharp class polarization, sowed seeds of social unrest among the lower classes. Most existing research has focused on macroeconomic perspectives, often overlooking the agency of youth in reshaping perceptions of political legitimacy. This article centers on the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising to examine how young people transformed from potential beneficiaries of authoritarian rule into challengers to the political legitimacy of the authoritarian regime. Drawing on historical documents and social survey data, this study adopts case analysis and incorporates Maslow's hierarchy of needs into the study of political legitimacy, analyzing how class disparities stemming from economic development shifted young people's aspirations, and how campus mobilization mechanisms amid expanding higher education channeled such discontent into organized resistance. The study aims to transcend the limitations of economic determinism, revealing the dynamic processes through which authoritarian regimes lose legitimacy

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among youth, and thereby offering valuable academic insights into the structural origins of contemporary social movements and the trajectory of political democratization.

2. The 1980 Gwangju social movement in South Korea

In May 1980, a democratization movement that shocked South Korea and the world erupted in Gwangju. Following the assassination of Park Chung-hee, Chun Doo-hwan seized military and political power through a coup and imposed martial law nationwide, sparking widespread public discontent. On May 18, students from Chonnam National University were the first to take to the streets to protest the martial law order, only to face an extremely brutal crackdown by the military's airborne troops [1]. This atrocity thoroughly enraged the citizens of Gwangju, with residents and students flooding the streets, spontaneously organizing armed resistance, and briefly seizing control of the city. Ultimately, the movement was brutally suppressed by the military's superior forces, resulting in numerous civilian and student deaths and injuries; the severity of the violence was unprecedented in contemporary South Korean history. Although the movement ended in a devastating defeat, it fundamentally shook the foundations of authoritarian rule and became a spiritual touchstone and collective memory for subsequent democratization movements in South Korea.

3. The political legitimacy of authoritarianism in South Korea

According to Max Weber's theory of political domination in *Economy and Society*, legitimate forms of authoritarian rule can be broadly categorized into three ideal types: traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational [2]. Within this analytical framework, the political legitimacy of the South Korean government during its authoritarian transition did not stem from a robust democratic process, but rather from charismatic leadership mobilization and the construction of "performance-based legitimacy."

During Park Chung-hee's rule, the South Korean government faced legitimacy pressures related to authoritarian governance. As a leader who seized power through a military coup, Park Chung-hee lacked traditional hereditary legitimacy and established democratic legal institutions. Therefore, the Park Chung-hee government anchored its legitimacy to economic growth through the "Miracle on the Han River." During the Fourth Republic, with the government backing heavy industries, electronics and steel industries flourished.By implementing a series of export-oriented economic policies, the government successfully linked the public's obligation to obey with the promise of economic growth, making "economic development first" the core ideology of its rule [3]. Under this model, various sectors of society suppressed their own needs for the sake of the grand narrative of national modernization, and the government established a performance-based consensus of power in the public's mind by demonstrating excellent administrative efficiency and significant economic achievements. However, this legitimacy of political achievements built on a single economic growth is inherently extremely fragile: once the social structural evolution brought about by economic development exceeds the capacity of the authoritarian system to accommodate it, or when the youth group is no longer satisfied with pure material growth due to improved education levels, this fragile legitimacy bond is very easy to collapse, thereby triggering social unrest and political crisis [4].

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4. How the south korean government lost political legitimacy among South Korean youth

4.1. The postwar generation of South Korean youth

Economic determinism is a socioeconomic theory that economic relationships (such as being an owner or capitalist or being a worker or proletarian) are the foundation upon which all other societal and political arrangements in society are based [5]. Traditional economic determinism blindly believes that material production and wealth growth are the sole cornerstone of political stability, asserting that as long as the state can continuously provide economic dividends, the people will naturally submit to authoritarian rule. This theory simplifies the development of human society to a purely materialistic account, completely ignoring the complex evolution of social psychology and political demands. From a purely economic perspective, the logic by which authoritarian states deploy macro-economic controls to secure popular political acceptance appears impeccable. However, this mechanical cause-and-effect relationship has faced severe real-world challenges in postwar South Korean society.

This challenge is particularly pronounced in generational differences. Unlike the middle-aged and elderly South Koreans who experienced extreme poverty after the war and consider basic sustenance a blessing, the postwar generation of South Korean youth—often referred to as the 386 generation or the student activists of the democratization era—never experienced the hardships of national economic collapse and material scarcity [6]. From their birth, South Korea's macro-economy had followed a long-term upward trajectory, leading them to regard basic material prosperity and economic growth as an inherent right rather than a privilege granted by the state. As interviews with those who experienced the social movements of the 1980s reveal, South Korean youth resisted authoritarian power under extreme isolation, demonstrating their determination to pursue human rights and freedom [7].

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, human psychological needs do not remain permanently fixed at the level of basic survival [8]. Because young people have already had their lower-level needs fully met, their psychological focus inevitably shifts towards higher levels of political freedom and self-actualization. Unlike middle-aged and elderly people, South Korean youth no longer centered their demands on elementary physiological needs such as food, water, air and sleep; instead, they turned toward needs related to dignity, cognitive fulfillment, and self-actualization [9]. This intergenerational upgrade in needs has resulted in extremely low acceptance of the government's traditional economic legitimacy among South Korean youth, ultimately leading to large-scale social conflict.

4.2. The expansion of higher education fosters engineering-student alliances

Beyond this intergenerational shift in young people's priorities, the rapid expansion of higher education is another core mechanism for dismantling authoritarian rule. The authoritarian government's vigorous promotion of higher education expansion policies in pursuit of modernization inadvertently sowed the seeds of systemic subversion, becoming a breeding ground for core mobilization structures [10].

The government emphasised universities as an important institution in promoting economic growth. Under state initiative, the idea of "nation-building through industrialisation" was harmonised with that of "nation-building through education." In 1974, the state rolled out a policy to strengthen engineering disciplines across national universities.. It designated 51 engineering departments from 18 national universities and provided governmental funds for research [11]. With

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the rapid expansion of university campuses, and despite the higher education enrollment rate remaining relatively restricted—hovering around 7% to 10% during the 1970s and early 1980s, which positioned university students strictly as a highly coveted intellectual elite within the broader youth demographic— a massive influx of young intellectuals not only psychologically achieved a leap towards political freedom and self-realization but also accumulated strong collective action capabilities through student unions and other organizational forms [12]. As relevant research has pointed out, faced with severe authoritarian pressure, these highly educated youths were not satisfied with the economic benefits bestowed by the system but actively broke down the walls, extending their protests to vast grassroots factories and rural areas. In this process, young students played a crucial "bridge" role due to their unique organizational advantages. For example, South Korean university students (such as intellectual youth from Seoul National University and Korea University) step out of the campus and into garment factories and the Guro industrial base in places like Cheonggyecheon Stream, guiding workers to form independent unions and carry out labor rights protection [13]. They forged close social ties with ordinary workers at the grassroots level, successfully facilitating a broad alliance spanning workers, peasants, and academia.

The workers were not lambs to the slaughter. Following Park Chung-hee's death, South Korea experienced political turmoil, and people gained a brief period of freedom of speech. Workers seized this political openness to voice their previously suppressed demands, leading to a wave of labor unrest in the spring of 1980. The number of reported labor disputes surged from 105 in 1979 to 407 in 1980. The vast majority of these conflicts involved economic issues such as unpaid wages, demands for higher wages, factory closures, and layoffs [14]. This occurred through the catalytic and deep interconnection of young students (via night schools and underground organizations).

The expansion of higher education brought together a growing number of like-minded young people with similar political goals, raising their cognitive levels. However, this educational expansion, which it fostered, also created the most destructive mobilization structures for social movements. In the film "The Attorney," university students secretly watch banned videotapes through club activities, using depictions of state violence to awaken greater demands for democracy among their peers. In reality, some universities have indeed operated this way [15]. Students find it difficult to learn systematic critical political theory and democratic ideas such as liberalism in formal classrooms, but they can spread these ideas privately and gradually, drawing more classmates into the movement. Through education and social practice, these young people witnessed the hardships of the underprivileged and the social injustices suffered by minorities. They focused on collaborating with workers and demanding social change. Ultimately, these efforts coalesced scattered social grievances into a broad current of democratic resistance, fundamentally eroding the foundations of authoritarian rule.

5. Conclusion

This study takes the 1980 Gwangju Democratic Uprising in South Korea as a central case to explore in depth how authoritarian regimes lose political legitimacy among youth and ultimately trigger social movements. This research finds that while economic growth generated by the "Miracle on the Han River" furnished Park Chung-hee's regime with a solid basis for performance-based legitimacy — especially among middle-aged and older generations — the sharp class polarization accompanying this growth brought about a qualitative shift in the demands of the postwar youth cohort. Based on Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the younger generation's aspirations evolved from basic material survival toward higher-level goals such as political freedom and self-actualization. As a result, the authoritarian regime's reliance solely on economic growth as a source of legitimacy

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became highly vulnerable due to its inability to adapt to this psychological transformation. At the same time, the government's policy of expanding higher education to promote industrialization inadvertently fostered a highly organized network of student activists. These students deeply engaged with grassroots factories and the working class, forming broad alliances that eventually transformed scattered social grievances into a systematic democratic resistance movement.

Although this paper provides an in-depth analysis of the internal mechanisms linking youth activism and the erosion of authoritarian legitimacy through historical documents and social survey data, it still has certain limitations. First, the study primarily focuses on macro-level social structures and meso-level university mobilization, leaving the examination of micro-level psychological motivations of individual actors relatively underdeveloped. Second, the analysis of the combined roles played by the middle class and rural communities in the movement remains insufficiently comprehensive. Future research may draw on additional micro-level interview data and quantitative survey evidence to strengthen dynamic analyses of youth political participation during authoritarian transitions. Additionally, this analytical framework could be horizontally extended to other East Asian countries or regions undergoing authoritarian transition, examining how local social movements have influenced and reshaped political systems, while also exploring similarities and differences—and potential universality—of youth mobilization mechanisms across different economic structures.

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