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What Happened to the Poster Child: Is South Korean Democracy Backsliding?

INSTITUTSKOLLOQUIUM / DEPARTMENTAL SEMINAR

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Or join online via Zoom: 930 8975 0663
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South Korean democracy has been under attack. This is most apparent in President Yoon Suk-Yeol's attempt to impose martial law, but this has not been the only challenge to Korean democracy – previously regarded as one of the most successful third-wave democracies. Though not calling into question obvious moments of democratic regress, we challenge arguments of Korean democracy backsliding and instead point to the country's democratic roller coaster: ascend under progressive leadership followed by sharp decline under right-wing administrations. Democratic resilience is also evidenced in civil society mobilization and popular uprising in democratic crises, and the rise of programmatic party competition has been vital in democratic consolidation. Important achievements notwithstanding, we recognize a profound legitimacy crisis in Korean politics and propose an institutionalist account of democratic stagnation in Korea that puts centre-stage constitutional flaws of the political system and the chaebol-dominated economy. This institutional perspective informs our argument that fundamental constitutional reform that recalibrates the relationship between the executive and the legislature is imperative, and this with the priority objective of strengthening the party-political system. We contend that it is the Korean constitutional architecture that has been compromising the mediating capacity of political parties and, doing so, held back democratic progress.



Timo Fleckenstein is a Professor of Social Policy at the LSE (London School of Economics and Political Science). Timo is a political scientist by training and specialises in the comparative analysis of welfare states with a regional focus on Western Europe and East Asia. He has a particular interest in labour market, skills and family policies.

More information



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