

# NATION-BUILDING DURING THE FIRST REPUBLIC OF KOREA 1948-1960

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## Introduction

South Korea's political development is deeply rooted in the legacy of the First Republic. The First Republic of Korea was a crucial period in South Korea's history, during which it was recognized by the international society as a modern nation-state that embarked on a process of modernization. During this period, Western modern values and systems were adopted, and various social changes and reforms took place. Nevertheless, in 1948-1960, which was a typical early stage in the development of democracy, the authoritarian characteristics of the ruling regime were evident. The reforms and the limits of democracy play a crucial role in understanding the development trajectory and limitations of Korean political history. This study examines the developmental aspects of modern reforms during the First Republic, the limitations of its downfall due to the destruction of democracy, and how these legacies continue to shape contemporary Korean politics.

The reforms and limitations of the First Republic, which lasted from 1948 to 1960 and collapsed on April 19, 1960, are used to understand the political nature of modern South Korea and analyze the challenges and successes in the development of democracy. This article therefore focuses on the process of 'nation-building' in post-liberation Korea. Chapter 1 examines the efforts of the First Republic government to modernize Korean politics, such as the enactment of the constitution and the consolidation of the electoral system, which were modern reforms during the First Republic. Qualitative research was conducted to review the literature of Korean and foreign scholars on the First Republic, and content analysis was conducted using archival materials of the Korean government and official administrative documents of countries closely related to nation-building in Korea.

### 1. Modern reforms during the First Republic

On August 15, 1945, the Korean peninsula was

liberated from Japanese rule. On August 15, 1948, the government of the Republic of Korea was officially proclaimed internationally. The Republic of Korea was the first democratic republic in history to be established on its territory by its nation. From this point in time until 2024, the constitution has been amended on nine occasions. It can be stated that South Korea is currently living in the '1987 system,' or the ninth constitutional system [SBS, 2016]. This article will concentrate on the first republic, the Syngman Rhee regime, which played a pivotal role in the establishment of the Republic of Korea.

The Syngman Rhee regime sought to establish South Korea as a modern republic, defined by the elements of nation, sovereignty, and territory. The 'nation' was conceived as a political entity based on a modernist perspective. However, following the liberation of Korea in 1945, there emerged a divergence in the perceptions of various political leaders regarding the nature of the nation to be constructed. This included the 'National Ideology,' the 'Founding forces,' and the 'nation.'

During the colonial period, Koreans lacked the opportunity to experience a nation where they could exercise their political rights and form a political association. The loss of sovereignty due to colonization deprived Koreans of the rights of a 'nation', and the incomplete establishment of a united nation due to the division of North and South Korea made Koreans unable to be satisfied as a nation in a divided country. Therefore, Koreans were forced to focus more on the word 'ethnicity' than the word 'nation' in nation-building, and it was a betrayal of national sentiment for the North and South to establish independent governments. Thus, when explaining Korean nationalism after liberation, it is necessary to consider that the 'nation' aspect of political individuals based on modernism is weak and the ethno-symbolism aspect is strong.

The central question and theme of this article, 'The Nation-building process and legacy of The

First Republic of Korea,' is framed in the following perspective.

The First Republic had a positive impact on nation-building in South Korea, establishing the framework of a modern sovereign state (constitution, parliament, sovereignty). However, it also left behind an ambivalent legacy of democratic contradictions as a result of the harsh reality of international politics externally and authoritarian politics internally. Malešević examined the ambivalence of realpolitik and the existence of the state in his book *Grounded Nationalism* (2019).

According to Malešević, "*Nation-state is nominally conceptualised as 'secularised social organisations with fixed and stable territory and a centralised political authority underpinned by intensive ideological particularism and the promotion of moral egalitarianism, social solidarity and cultural homogeneity among its populace'*" [Malešević, 2019: 74].

It is certain that starting with the Constitutional National Assembly in 1948, a constitution was created, and awareness of popular sovereignty was strengthened. However, Malešević later stated that "*For one thing, very few contemporary nation states are culturally homogeneous or built around strict moral egalitarian principles. While this might feature as a strong ideological aspiration, often inscribed in the constitutions of modern states, the actual realities rarely match these ambitions.*" [Malešević, 2019: 74-75].

In this way, it is important to note that the nation-building process in a developing country, such as South Korea, is distinct from the maturity of democracies or modern sovereign states in the West. These countries have been building democracy for a long time and have experienced both failures and successes. As Malešević argues, apparently, the First Republic had a very balanced and peaceful constitutional design, introduced representative democracy with direct elections, and was recognized as a legitimate government in the international community. However, as illegal acts such as the March 15 unfair elections that violated the spirit of the constitution continued, the internal contradictions finally exploded on April 19, 1960, and the First Republic collapsed in a massive nationwide uprising on April 19, 1960 (Bloody Tuesday) and April 26, 1960 (Victory Tuesday) [Oh, Jeyeon, 2018: 47].

### 1.1. Conducting elections and establishment of a constitution

A series of political events, including the liberation in 1945 and the enactment of the Constitution in 1948, provided the opportunity to establish a new nation. South Korea's constitution was not the work of a small elite nor was it the work of a small group of intelligent. Consequently, the Constitution of South Korea stipulates equality, freedom, justice, human rights, peace, solidarity, security, and happiness as important constitutional values [Su Yong, Kim, 2018:36].

The first Constitution of Korea was a liberal democracy and a mixed economy, but it also reflected the line of centrists who supported socialism. As evidence of this, **Article 85** of the Constitution provides for the nationalization of important underground resources and marine resources, **Article 86** provides for the distribution of farmland to farmers, and **Article 87** provides for the nationalization or public ownership of public enterprises such as transportation, communication, and finance, and state control of foreign trade. In other words, the Constitution was an economically progressive constitution that stipulated the prioritization of economic and social justice, state control of the economy, the right of workers to share in the profits, and state protection of the extremely poor [Jung Bock, Lee, 1996 : 12].

### 1.2. Realist Diplomacy in the Context of International Politics

The Korean War, which took place from 1950 to 1953, was an all-out clash on the Korean Peninsula between the United States' desire to build an anti-communist bulwark after World War II and the Soviet Union's desire to build a communist bloc. Hence, the conflict on the Korean Peninsula was inextricably linked to the establishment of the Cold War system on a global scale.

In 1947, the President Harry S. Truman Doctrine was announced, and the Marshall Plan was launched. The Cold War began in earnest and had a negative impact on the situation on the Korean Peninsula. In particular, the victory of the Chinese Revolution and the Soviet nuclear tests in 1949 increased the need for the United States to pursue a 'firm policy' in Asia [Cumings, B. 1996: 82].

Syngman Rhee's regime believed that peaceful

reunification through intergovernmental dialogue was virtually impossible under these circumstances, and the First Republic, in consultation with the United States, adopted a policy of automatically referring the Korean issue to the United Nations every year [Jung Bock, Lee, 1996: 29]. The UN, which was under the influence of the United States at the time, invited only the Republic of Korea representative to discuss Korean affairs every year until the 14th General Assembly in 1959 after the Geneva Conference failed. The First Republic interpreted international politics from a realist perspective and sought to further solidify its alliance with the United States by acting in the interests of the most hegemonic nation of the time.

The rationale behind this policy can be attributed to two key factors.

First, the growing public aversion towards communism in the aftermath of the Korean War. Second, the South Korean government sought to garner the support of the United States, the other dominant power in the Cold War, in its confrontation with the Soviet-backed North Korea. During the fifteen years after the Korean War, South Korea frequently topped the list of U.S. aid recipients. Kennedy-era policy documents referred to South Korea as one of the “big five” countries-along with Pakistan, Vietnam, Taiwan, and Turkey-that received both military and economic support. In 1960 alone the United States dispensed to South Korea \$380 million more than it provided any of the other big five and 7.6 percent of the total U.S. foreign aid budget. Private philanthropic groups, such as the Asia Foundation and the American Korean Foundation, that were active in the country supplemented official largesse with millions of dollars to support social and cultural programs [Brazinsky, G. A. 2009: 19]. The First Republic government also sought to obtain as much aid as possible from the United States to rebuild the economy and to promote trade with foreign countries. Based on this realistic perspective, Syngman Rhee's regime succeeded in obtaining the necessary military aid from the U.S. to compensate for the withdrawal of 360,000 U.S. troops at the time of the 1953 armistice with a reinforcement of the South Korean armed forces and, from 1957 onward, to improve the quality of the South Korean armed forces through a modernization plan [Bock, Lee, 1996: 33].

## 2. Limitations and Contradictions of Democracy during the First Republic

### 2.1. 3.15 Unfair Elections and Suppression of Opposition

According to the public opinion poll conducted by the U.S. military government on 10,000 people in July 1946, the majority of 8,467 respondents, 4,537, classified themselves as neutral, 2,498 declared themselves right-wing, and all of those who claimed to be left-wing were 1,462 people about 1/6. However, when it comes to different types of questions such as “*Which system do you like between capitalism, socialism, and communism?*”, only 13% of people responded with capitalism, 70% responded with socialism, and 10% responded with communism. It clearly shows the ideological tendencies of the time [Park, Jung I, 2013: 175].

The phenomenon in question was the result of scientifically valid reasons. Those who accumulated wealth and retained their vested interests during the Japanese occupation were deemed to have collaborated with Japan, rather than being victims of exploitation. Therefore, communist, and socialist forces that were uncompromising with Japan and actively committed to the independence movement were more popular with the people [Bock, Lee, 1996: 11].

However, the First Republic's objective of establishing a government that would be cooperative with the United States and its vested interests led to the marginalization of leftists from the political sphere. The most prominent example of this was the ‘Scandal of the Progressive Party.’ The Progressive Party was founded in 1956 and sought to break the entrenched conservative two-party system, but the party lost ground in 1958 when its leader Cho Bong-am was executed under the National Security Act (the Supreme Court acquitted him in January 2011 after a retrial). The Progressive Party's ideology, stated at its founding convention, was ‘social democracy’ and called for a welfare state, social security system, improved living conditions for all citizens, equality of distribution, rapid economic growth, peaceful reunification, and the implementation of democracy [Seunghyun Jung, 2013:121]. In his party opening speech, Cho Bong-am made it clear that the Progressive Party's goal was “the progressive line of social reform that rejects both communism and capitalism.” Although he was not a communist or had close ties to the Soviet Union, he was eventually repressed by

Syngman Rhee's regime because he adopted the peaceful reunification policy, which was taboo at the time, and insisted on holding general elections in North and South Korea under the supervision of the United Nations.

In addition to this extreme repression of the opposition, in the presidential/vice presidential election held on March 15, 1960, the Syngman Rhee regime engaged in massive election fraud to extend its rule. ▲Fraudulent practices such as stuffing ballot boxes with as much as 40 percent of the ruling party's votes, ▲open voting in threes or fives, ▲switching ballot boxes, and ▲expelling opposition observers were used to prolong the liberal party's rule.

Consequently, the results were completely falsified, and in one precinct in Daegu, a traditionally strong opposition region, the interim tally showed a shocking result of 5,000 votes for the Liberal Party and 32 votes for the Democratic Party [Jun Sik, Lee, 2016: 246]. In response, public dissatisfaction with the blatantly illegal and fraudulent election exploded everywhere, and the student resistance movement that was sparked in Daegu quickly spread to other regions.

On April 26, 1960, Syngman Rhee's stepping down statement was announced over the radio at 10:30 a.m. The National Assembly immediately convened in plenary session and unanimously passed a four-point resolution to restore order. By the resolution, Syngman Rhee submitted his resignation to the National Assembly at noon on April 27, and the National Assembly accepted it, thereafter, thus marking the end of the First Republic.

Although the First Republic enacted an election system, which is the core of democracy that any modern country must adopt, the First Republic under Syngman Rhee reinterpreted and abused the constitution to extend his regime to the point that it could hardly be considered a democracy. Table 1, which follows, is an archive of slogans from the April 19 Revolution, the most decisive event in the collapse of the First Republic. The 4.19 Revolution was the result of a nationwide outburst of pent-up popular demands, and its slogans can be used to infer an assessment of the nation-building process of the First Republic.

**Table 1. The slogan of April Revolution**

Let's go north, come south	Give us the freedom of the academy
Let's oust the democratic rebels.	The 3.15 election fraud is illegal and invalid.
Let's hold another presidential election	Overthrow dictatorship, guarantee freedom of academies
Let's defend democracy	The freedom I found with blood, are you going to take it away with a gun or a sword?

*Source: Open archives, Korea Democracy Foundation (<https://archives.kdemo.or.kr/contents/view/224>)*

## 2.2. The nation-building process failed to fulfill the wishes of the majority.

The priority in nation-building after liberation was to punish the pro-Japanese collaborators. During the U.S. military rule from 1945 to 1948, Korea's antipathy toward the pro-Japanese forces was high, but the U.S. military government did not impose any sanctions on the pro-Japanese forces but rather used them in the governing body [Lee Jung-bok:24]. The U.S. military government lacked internal conflict and a nationalistic understanding of Korea, and in selecting officials to help the U.S. military government, it followed the principle of appointing anyone suitable for the job, and few Americans cared about their previous experience before liberation [Bruce Cumings, 2023: 237]. Under these circumstances, the First Republic inherited a pro-Japanese problem that the U.S. military government had failed to address. The Special Investigation Committee for Anti-National Actors was an organization for the liquidation of pro-Japanese factions that was promoted by the National Assembly shortly after the establishment of the Korean government. On September 22, 1948, the Constitutional Assembly promulgated the Anti-National Acts Punishment Act to punish pro-Japanese factions that collaborated with the Japanese and committed acts of national treason during the period of national aggression. Subsequently, the National Assembly formed the Special Committee on Anti-National Acts, elected a former independence activist as its chairman, and established several other bodies. However, out of a total of 682 cases handled by the special committee, 559 cases were sent to special prosecutors, but only 10 pro-Japanese were

tried and sentenced to prison, and almost all of them were released through probation, reduced sentences, or suspended sentences [Lee Jung-bok:27]. The independence activists who threatened Rhee's rule were his competitors or potential competitors, and pro-Japanese careerists could not be his competitors. Therefore, Rhee chose a strategy of cooperating with the pro-Japanese and focusing on the systemic confrontation with North Korea instead of actively dealing with them.

### 3. The impact of nation-building in the First Republic on modern Korean politics

#### 3.1. Rapid but incomplete nation-building

*"The declaration of statehood does not imply the completion of building a nation. The building of a nation or national identity makes the presence of a state compulsory [Valiyev 2023: 17]."* Although the First Republic was internationally recognized as a legitimate government, the nation-building process and the resulting national identity did not grow democratically.

The Korean constitutions that followed the First Constitution reflected the line of the centrists who supported liberal democracy in politics and mixed economy or socialism in economics and were based on the realization of social justice and the development of a balanced economy. However, during the U.S. military government and the First Republic, economic and social justice were not prioritized, workers' right to share in profits was not recognized, and the state did not protect those who were unable to earn a living [Lee Jung-bok:11]. As a developing country with a nascent capitalist economy and limited resources, South Korea encountered several practical challenges, including the constraints of a weak state that could not uphold the spirit of its constitution.

Based on the above arguments, the impact of nation-building in the First Republic on contemporary Korean politics can be analyzed in two ways.

Firstly, it can be observed that although the country made a declaration to the international community and established the foundation and basis for modern reforms, it has yet to fully realize the ideal state based on the constitution. The First Republic continued to exhibit authoritarian attitudes that contradicted the spirit of the Constitution. The ruthless repression of opponents of the regime using the ide-

ology of 'Anti-communism' and 'Pro-North' serves as a red-complex, or attack logic, that is still used to this day when discussing pluralistic values of welfare, labor rights, and minorities. It provided the theoretical foundation and experience to undermine the pluralistic and liberal democratic values underlying the Constitution.

Secondly, the First Republic was founded upon a realist diplomatic approach, which made significant contributions to economic development by promoting liberalism and democracy in the South. This was achieved with the support of the United States through U.S. aid. However, the national aspirations of liquidating the pro-Japanese faction and building one nation-state were thwarted by the strategy of establishing a government through the right-wing forces that partnered with the United States.

#### 4. Conclusion

Upon liberation in 1945, the First Republic was faced with the great challenge of building a modern nation-state. This period can be characterized as the beginning of modern Korean politics and the origin that has most influenced the current political specificity of South Korea. The two strategies chosen by the First Republic were to be integrated into the U.S.-led world system from a realist perspective and to continue the systemic competition with North Korea. This allowed the South to enter the international community with the support and recognition of the U.S.-led UN and to develop and grow with U.S. aid. However, it also led to ethnic conflicts and complicated relations with communist countries.

Another strategy was to protect South Korea from communism by forming a strong government using a uniform, state-centered ideology instead of pluralistic values, which is the core value of democracy. This resulted in the ruthless repression of non-communist opponents of the regime and undermined democratic values.

This study demonstrates that nation-building is a multifaceted phenomenon and accessing it through a macro-level framework is highly valid and essential to understanding South Korea's contemporary political dynamics and foreign policy. This is particularly important in a country with a unique historical context such as South Korea, which was on the frontline of the Cold War, experienced colonization, and still has a strong division system. The findings of this

study will enable insights to be gained into the nation-building process in South Korea, the ideologies employed in this results, and comparative studies with countries with similar experiences of colonization and division in the Third World.

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### SUMMARY

This paper provides a balanced analysis and evaluation of the nation-building of the First Republic of Korea, which has had the most impact on the Korean political landscape. In modern Korean politics, the First Republic is often praised as a reformative period that built a modern state, but it is also criticized for its limitations that undermined democracy. Regardless of liberal and conservative ideologies, this paper evaluates the First Republic through the macro framework of the nation-building process. Also, it investigates the constitutional elements of the First Republic and notes the modern nation-building of the First Republic, which not only established the constitution based on equality, freedom, justice, human rights, peace, solidarity, security, and happiness but also confirmed that the political system was liberal democracy, and the economy was mixed.

In addition, it is revealed that based on a realist perspective, the First Republic strengthened its national identity in terms of security, economy, and politics by attracting the support of the United States, a superpower in the Cold War.

However, in the process, it also purged dissenters based on an extreme ideology of anti-communism and engaged in fraudulent elections to prolong Syngman Rhee's regime, revealing persistent contradictions, such as the appearance of a modern state but the disappearance of pluralism. In conclusion, this article found that the institutional legacy of the First Republic continues to exert a significant influence on contemporary South Korean politics, with both positive and contradictory outcomes.

**Keywords:** *The First Republic of Korea, Nation-building, Modernization, Constitution, Democracy.*

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**1948-1960-cı illərdə Birinci Koreya Respublikası  
dövründə dövlət quruculuğu  
XÜLASƏ**

Bu məqalə Koreyanın siyasi mənzərəsinə ən çox təsir göstərən Birinci Koreya Respublikasının dövlət quruculuğunun balanslaşdırılmış təhlili və qiymətləndirilməsini təqdim edir. Müasir Koreya siyasətində Birinci Respublika tez-tez müasir dövlət quran islahatlar dövrü kimi təriflənir, lakin o, demokratiyanı sarsıdan məhdudiyyətlərinə görə də tənqid edilir. Liberal və mühafizəkar ideologiyalardan asılı olmayaraq, bu məqalə Birinci Respublikanı dövlət quruculuğu prosesinin makro çərçivəsi vasitəsilə qiymətləndirir. Həmçinin, Birinci Respublikanın konstitusiya elementlərini araşdırır və təkcə bərabərlik, azadlıq, ədalət, insan hüquqları, sülh, həmrəylik, təhlükəsizlik və xoşbəxtliyə əsaslanan konstitusiya quran Birinci Respublikanın müasir dövlət quruculuğunu qeyd edir, habelə siyasi sistemin liberal demokratiya olduğunu və iqtisadiyyatın qarışıq olduğunu təsdiqləyir.

Bundan əlavə, realist perspektivə əsaslanan Birinci Respublikanın "soyuq müharibə"də super güc olan ABŞ-nin dəstəyini öz üzərinə çəkərək təhlükəsizlik, iqtisadiyyat və siyasət baxımından milli kimliyini gücləndirdiyi ortaya çıxır.

Bununla belə, bu prosesdə həm də ifrat anti-kommunizm ideologiyasına əsaslanan müxalifləri təmizlənməsi və Syngman Rhee rejimini uzatmaq üçün saxta seçkilərlə məşğul olması müasir dövlətin yaranması, lakin plüralizmin yoxa çıxması kimi davamlı ziddiyyətləri üzə çıxarır. Yekun olaraq, bu məqalə Birinci Respublikanın institusional irsinin həm müsbət, həm də ziddiyyətli nəticələri ilə müasir Cənubi Koreya siyasətinə əhəmiyyətli təsir göstərməyə davam etdiyini müəyyən edir.

**Açar sözlər:** *Birinci Koreya Respublikası, Millət quruculuğu, Modernləşmə, Konstitusiya, Demokratiya.*

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**Национальное строительство во время  
Первой Республики Корея, 1948-1960 гг.**

**РЕЗЮМЕ**

Данная статья представляет собой комплексный анализ и оценку процесса национального строительства в период Первой Республики Кореи, оказавшей определяющее влияние на политический ландшафт страны. В современной корейской политике Первую Республику часто восхваляют как реформаторский период, заложивший основы современного государства, но одновременно критикуют за ограничения, подрывающие демократические принципы.

Отстранившись от либеральных и консервативных идеологических штампов, данная статья рассматривает Первую Республику через призму макроструктуры процесса национального строительства. В ней исследуются конституционные основы Первой Республики, а также подчеркивается прогрессивный характер ее национального строительства, выразившийся не только в принятии конституции, основанной на принципах равенства, свободы, справедливости, прав человека, мира, солидарности, безопасности и счастья, но и в утверждении либерально-демократической политической системы и смешанной экономики.

С реалистической точки зрения, Первая Республика укрепила национальную идентичность в сфере безопасности, экономики и политики, заручившись поддержкой Соединенных Штатов – сверхдержавы в период Холодной войны.

Однако, в процессе реализации этих целей она также подавляла инакомыслие на основе экстремистской идеологии антикоммунизма и фальсифицировала выборы для продления правления президента Сингмана Ри, обнажая устойчивые противоречия между становлением современного государства и ущемлением плюрализма.

В заключение, статья отмечает, что институциональное наследие Первой Республики продолжает оказывать значительное влияние на современную южнокорейскую политику, имея как положительные, так и противоречивые последствия.

**Ключевые слова:** *Первая Республика Корея, Государственное строительство, Модернизация, Конституция, Демократия.*