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Ending One-Party Dominance: Korea, Taiwan, Mexico

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Abstract

The astonishing electoral victories by opposition presidential candidates in Korea, Taiwan, and Mexico all followed a remarkably similar pattern, but it is one that may lead to difficulties for democratic consolidation.

ENDING ONE-PARTY DOMINANCE: KOREA, TAIWAN, MEXICO

Dorothy J. Solinger

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The last few years have witnessed a series of astonishing electoral victories by opposition-party presidential candidates in regimes that had experienced decades of one-party hegemony—Kim Dae Jung in South Korea in December 1997, Chen Shui-bian in Taiwan in March 2000, and Vicente Fox in Mexico in July 2000.¹ Although authoritarian rule had effectively come to an end in all three countries somewhat earlier, these elections marked the first time that an opposition leader had captured the presidency. How did these victories come to pass? In each instance, the elections were predicted to be close; commentators had not foreseen the defeat of the ruling party. To what extent should we view these contests as the clinching moment in which a long process of democratization was sealed and a full-fledged democracy revealed?

These opposition victories should be regarded not simply as the product of a finally freed-up, democratically expressed public will, but as the outcome of a lengthy process of unraveling of single-party domination, first unleashed long before by the decision to allow "limited elections" and then given a critical boost by the perhaps necessary result of those elections, a split in the ruling party. I contend that similar factors have been at work in all three countries, and I will seek to demonstrate that a certain logic and a set of regularities marked the chain of events that culminated in opposition victories. Each step in the process I will describe prepared the way for the step that followed, eventuating in the same outcome at almost the same historical moment in all three countries. Moreover, as I will show, the playing out of this sequence may create severe obstacles for the subsequent task of democratic consolidation.

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