FACTS ABOUT ASIA

South Korea and Singapore: Economic and Political Freedom

Editor's Introduction: By the 1990s, the dynamic economic growth of four polities—Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan—earned them the nickname "Four Little Dragons." Each of the "Little Dragons" also obtained moderate to significant levels of political freedom (Freedom House ranks South Korea and Taiwan as free and Hong Kong and Singapore as partly free). Please see our column from fall 2019 on the other two "Little Dragons": Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Economic Freedom

Despite their relatively small sizes geographically, South Korea and Singapore both possess very strong economies, ranking twelfth and thirty-fourth in GDP (the market value of all goods and services) in a ranking of the top fifty world leaders in 2019. The major sectors of South Korea's economy include shipbuilding, electronics, and automobiles, where several large, family-run conglomerates called *chaebŏls* dominate. Examples of these conglomerates include Hyundai, Samsung, and LG. Singapore is a major global financial hub with world-class banks as well as major electronics, biotechnology, and energy (primarily oil and gas) industries. Private and state-owned enterprises play a significant role in Singapore's economy.

Since 1996, the Fraser Institute, a top Canadian think tank, has annually published the *Economic Freedom of the World (EFW) Report,* which measures the degree to which the policies and institutions of countries are supportive of economic freedom. The cornerstones of economic freedom according to the institute are personal choice, voluntary exchange, freedom to enter markets and compete, security of the person, and privately owned property. Forty-two data points are used to compile a summary index in the publication for each country to measure the degree of economic freedom in five broad areas: size of government, legal system and property rights, sound money, freedom to trade internationally, and regulation. For 2019, 162 countries and territories received a score in each category, where zero is the lowest possible rating and ten the highest.

For 2019, South Korea ranked thirty-third of the 162 countries and territories included in the *EFW Report.* Singapore was the world's second-freest economy, trailing only perennial world leader Hong Kong. Since the early years of the twenty-first century, Singapore has been ranked lower than second only three times in *EFW Reports.*

Summary Economic Freedom Ratings from *Economic Freedom of the World 2019*

1. Hong Kong 8.91
2. Singapore 8.71
3. New Zealand 8.50
4. Switzerland 8.40
5. United States 8.19
…
33. South Korea 7.59

Summary of South Korea

Rank: 33
Score: 7.59/10

Rank	Score (out of 10)	Category
48	7.04	Size of Government
30	6.47	Legal System and Property Rights
16	9.60	Sound Money
62	7.59	Freedom to Trade Internationally
69	7.26	Regulation

Summary of Singapore

Rank: 2
Score: 8.71/10

Rank	Score (out of 10)	Category
39	7.20	Size of Government
7	8.22	Legal System and Property Rights
2	9.85	Sound Money
2	9.29	Freedom to Trade Internationally
3	8.98	Regulation

Sources for South Korea and Singapore: The World Bank, "GDP Ranking," *The World Bank Data Catalog*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/unnyuya; "Industrial Brand Leaders and Korean Industrial Standards," *Korea.net*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/vvdqefk; "Key Industries and Activities," *Singapore Economic Development Board*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/uneedvp; "What Are the Biggest Industries in Singapore?," *World Atlas*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/rm8hwxc; "Economic Freedom of the World 2019," *Fraser Institute*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/v6ad7f4.

Democracy

Freedom House, an American independent watchdog organization dedicated to the expansion of freedom and democracy around the world, has released a report each year since 1973 assessing the condition of political rights and civil liberties around the world, titled *Freedom in the World*. The report rates 195 countries and fourteen territories using a combination of on-the-ground research; consultations with local contacts; and information from news articles, nongovernmental organizations, governments, and a variety of other sources. Each country and territory receives a score from zero to four in 25 indicators in political rights (forty points) and civil liberties (sixty points), where a total score of zero is the least free and 100 the most free. A description of free, partly free, or not free is then given to each based upon their final score.

For 2019, South Korea received a score of 83/100, free, where it tied for eighteenth among a list of the freest countries. Singapore received a score of 51/100, partly free, where it tied for forty-sixth.

Most Free Counties, *Freedom in the World 2019*

1. Sweden, Finland, Norway (tie) 100
2. The Netherlands and Canada (tie) 99
3. New Zealand, Uruguay, Australia, and Luxembourg (tie) 98
4. Ireland 97
…
15. United States, Belize (tie) 86
…
18. South Korea, Ghana, São Tomé and Príncipe (tie) 83
…
46. Singapore, Armenia, Côte d'Ivoire, Mozambique (tie) 51

Summary of South Korea

Free
Aggregate Score: 83/100
Political Rights: 33/40
Civil Liberties: 50/60

Overview: South Korea

South Korea's democratic system features regular rotations of power and robust political pluralism, with the largest parties representing conservative and liberal views. Personal freedoms are generally respected, though the country struggles with minority rights and social integration. Legal bans on pro-North Korean activity have sometimes affected legitimate political expression, though since the start of inter-Korean rapprochement in early 2018, there has been greater pressure on those airing negative views of North Korea and inter-Korean engagement.

Summary of Singapore

Partly Free
Aggregate Score: 51/100
Political Rights: 19/40
Civil Liberties: 32/60

Overview: Singapore

Singapore's parliamentary political system has been dominated by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) . . . since 1959. The electoral and legal framework that the PAP has constructed allows for some political pluralism, but it constrains the growth of credible opposition parties and limits freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Source: *Freedom House*, "Freedom in the World 2019," accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/y66h5scf.

Government and Political Institutions

South Korea

National Assembly Building of the Republic of Korea. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/vqhudhg.

The roots of Korean civilization, based upon Chinese records, date back at least to 108 BCE. For hundreds of years, separate kingdoms and unified monarchies alternatively ruled the peninsula. The peninsula's most famous unified dynasty (Chosŏn) existed from 1392 until 1905, when Korea became first a Japanese protectorate and then in 1910, a colony of Imperial Japan. In 1948, the Cold War superpowers turned governance of their respective occupation zones over to Koreans with the establishment of the Democratic Republic of Korea (North Korea) and the Republic of Korea (South Korea).

The government of South Korea, since the last years of the twentieth century, has been a democratic republic with an executive, legislative, and judicial branch of government. The National Assembly is the unicameral national legislature of South Korea consisting of 300 members, and democratic elections to the assembly are held every four years. Members serve four-year terms in the assembly. A democratically elected president heads the executive branch and serves only a single five-year term. The president, subject to the approval of the National Assembly, appoints a prime minister to assist in the president's duties. The president also has the power to appoint various ministers in areas such as National Defense, Education, and Economy and Finance, who report directly to the prime minster. The judicial branch, consisting of a Supreme Court and a series of subordinate courts, is considered to be generally independent, and judges render verdicts in all cases. South Korea, however, does lack comprehensive antidiscrimination laws.

Currently, seven political parties are represented in the National Assembly and the current president, Moon Jae-in, represents the center-left Democratic Party. Moon was elected president in 2017 and will finish his term with the next election in 2022. Moon's predecessor, Park Geun-hye of the conservative Grand National Party, was the first female democratically elected president in East Asia. Choi Soon-sil, a religious cultist leader with no official government position, wielded significant influence over Park. Then-president Park extorted conglomerates to donate to foundations owned by Choi. Choi also had illegal access to presidential speeches, and Park used her power to censor media investigations into her relationship with Choi. In 2016, Park was impeached and was later sentenced to twenty-four years in prison for her crimes.

Singapore

Parliament House in Singapore. Source: *Wikimedia Commons* at https://tinyurl.com/vxul2hh.

In 1819, British colonialists founded Singapore with the intent of countering Dutch regional dominance. Singapore remained a part of the British Empire and Commonwealth (Japanese Imperial forces controlled Singapore from 1942 to 1945) in one form or another until 1963, when with British approval it joined the Federation of Malaysia. In 1965, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP, Singapore became an independent nation.

Singapore's government is formally a parliamentary democracy consisting of a president who serves as head of state, a prime minister who serves as head of government, a unicameral parliament, and a judicial branch. The government is substantially more authoritarian in practice. The president serves six-year terms and is elected by popular vote with no term limits. The Singaporean Constitution grants the president executive power but also makes the cabinet responsible for the general direction and control of the government. Thus, the prime minister and parliament handle most of the work of governing. The president (whose responsibilities are largely ceremonial) appoints the prime minister, but to date, he is always a member of the controlling party of parliament, the PAP.

There are several political parties in Singapore, but the center-right PAP has dominated the government since 1959, when the late Lee Kuan Yew, whom many consider the nation's founding father, was elected prime minister. Lee stepped down in 1990 and was succeeded by PAP member Goh Chok Tong. Goh served as prime minister until 2004, when he was succeeded by Lee Hsien Loong—the eldest son of Lee Kuan Yew.

The parliament of Singapore consists of eighty-nine members elected by the people. There are a few more members of parliament, including both representatives of opposition parties and a few members who are appointed to "ensure a wide representation of community views in parliament." Still, the PAP exercises dominant control over the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. While Singapore's courts are considered impartial in terms of business-related cases, the government's consistent success in court has cast doubt on its independence. Singapore does have protections against discrimination, however.

General elections are to be held by five years after the date of a parliament's first sitting when it is dissolved by rule of law. General elections can be held at any point during these five years. The last parliamentary general election was in 2015, and the next election must occur by 2021. MPs and the prime minister are not term-limited—since 1959, there have only been three Singaporean prime ministers. ∎

Sources for South Korea and Singapore: "What Type of Government Does South Korea Have?," *World Atlas*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/vcmgmon; Donald N. Clark, *Key Issues in Asian Studies: Korea in World History* (Ann Arbor, MI: Association for Asian Studies, 2012); "News and Commentary: South Korea," *The New York Times*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/s366w38; "About Us: Structure," *Parliament of Singapore*, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/tbqh4r4; "Singapore: Government," *GlobalEDGE* Michigan State University, accessed November 19, 2019, https://tinyurl.com/tn2azoc; Charles Chao Rong Phua, "Top Ten Things to Know About Singapore," *Education About Asia* 22, no. 2 (2017): 62–64.