

The early tribal societies that occupied the Korean peninsula until the 7th century evolved in three conflicting kingdoms, the Koguryo, Paekche and Silla, each strongly influenced by Buddhism. After much warring, the Silla unified the Korean peninsula with the help of the Tang Chinese and ruled by absolute monarchy from their capital city of Kyongju for two centuries. Dissatisfied Silla aristocrats then established the Koryo dynasty which in 1392 was replaced by the Yi dynasty, which ruled for 500 years and adopted Confucianism as its official religion. Despite marked progress, this period was marked by internal conflict which led to a policy of isolation in the 18th and 19th centuries when Korea became known as "The Hermit Kingdom". This inward-looking policy left Korea unprepared for the colonial onslaught of the great powers which climaxed with the ruthless Japanese occupation of Korea from 1910 to 1945.

Following World War II, Korea was divided at the 38th parallel into military occupation zones, with Soviet forces occupying the industrial North and the Americans occupying the agrarian South. In 1950 North Korean forces launched an invasion of the South. This escalated into the Korean war, with Chinese forces supporting the North and United Nations forces aiding the South. In 1953 the opposing forces signed an armistice agreement establishing a demilitarized zone close to the 38th parallel.

After the assassination in 1979 of President Park Chung Hee, in May 1980, the army, led by General Chun Doo Whan, imposed martial law and seized power. Chun was elected President of Korea the following February under Korea's fifth constitution. However, his government was unable to gain any widespread support. On June 29, 1987, following large-scale demonstrations involving as many as 100,000 people, the Government acceded to demands that the constitution be revised to allow direct election of the President. The constitution of the 6th Republic was adopted in September 1987. Roh Tae Woo was elected President of Korea on December 4, 1987. In elections for the National Assembly, held on February 25, the 3 opposition parties together won a majority of the seats. The crowning achievement of Korea's modernization, the 24th Summer Olympics, was held from September 17 to October 2, 1988. Over 160 countries participated in the Games.