Candlelight Protests in South Korea: The Legacies of Authoritarianism and Democratization

Paul Y. Chang*

〈Abstract〉

The recent candlelight protests in the fall and winter of 2016 and 2017 marked a critical moment in the maturation of South Korean democracy. Through complex connections between contributing actors involving the protesting public, the National Assembly, and the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea, President Park Geun-hye became the first South Korea president to be impeached through democratic procedures. While acknowledging the significant differences that distinguish this most recent protest wave with contentious politics of the past, this article highlights the foundational legacies of South Korea’s authoritarian history. In addition, I reflect on how the contemporary candlelight protest industry draws on organizational and cultural resources first established in past democracy movements. In short, the political contest that brought down Park Geun-hye in 2016–2017 was in some tangible and intangible ways a reenactment of the authoritarian and democratization legacies that dominated much of South Korea’s modern history.

Key Words: candlelight protests, authoritarianism, democratization, South Korean, Park Geun-hye

* Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, USA, paulchang@fas.harvard.edu
  Date of submission: April 9, 2018  Date of revision: April 9, 2018
  Date of confirmation: April 18, 2018
I. Introduction

The lights were bright, and the music loud. They had to be to reach the uncountable throngs of people gathered in central Seoul on a mild winter evening in the closing month of 2016. December 3rd proved to be the peak of the weekly “candlelight protests” that began a few months earlier. Accurate counts of participants at the sixth Saturday protest are difficult to verify, with organizers and media reporting 1.88 million in Seoul and 2.32 million nationwide, while the authorities insist on “merely” a few hundred thousand. As with most things, the truth is probably somewhere in the middle but even on the low-end, the scale of protests in South Korea is on par with some of the most substantial examples of civil disobedience recorded in recent history.

To put things into comparative perspective, the largest democratic revolutions at the turn of the new century in post-Communist states included protests of around 600,000 in Serbia and Montenegro on September 24, 2000; 100,000 in Georgia on November 3, 2003; and 1 million on October 31, 2004 in Ukraine (Beissinger, 2007: 264). A more recent example is the “January 25 Revolution” in Egypt that was part of the Arab Spring movements that swept through the Middle East and North Africa. The final day of that Egyptian protest cycle recorded 1.2 million participants on February 11, 2011, across roughly sixty events nationwide (Ketchley, 2017).  

But beyond the impressive scale, the recent candlelight protests in South

---

1) I am grateful to Michael Biggs and Neil Ketchley for pointing me to these comparable cases.
Korea are significant because they represent a rare moment when a notoriously polarized society came together to uniformly demand the impeachment of President Park Geun-hye. At its nadir, the president’s approval rating plummeted to a remarkable 4%, by far the lowest of any South Korean president. More telling is that her approval ratings fell to dismal lows even among citizens of her hometown Daegu and among senior citizens, two reliable cornerstones of her support-base. If the “mandate of heaven” can be operationalized by modern-day political polling, then clearly the Korean people had lost faith in Park Geun-hye.

The pressures exerted by the incredible showing of “people power” motivated the National Assembly to vote to impeach the president on December 9, 2016. The following spring on March 10, 2017, the Constitutional Court of the Republic of Korea, in a unanimous 8-0 decision, upheld the National Assembly vote.2) The people protested, the legislature voted, and the court judged, all to check the power of the executive branch of government. One wonders whether this is what the founders of American democracy imagined when they first created the system of checks and balances.

The factors that motivated the first impeachment of a South Korean president are complex, dramatic, and perhaps even “bizarre” (Kelly, 2016). It is not the purpose of this article to detail the recent events that led to Park’s impeachment, nor to provide a political or legal analysis of her case that resulted in a prison sentence of 24 years for the former president and a 16.8 million dollar fine. Instead, I aim to provide a longer historical

2) South Korean law stipulates that upon a successful presidential impeachment vote by the National Assembly, the case must be heard by the Constitutional Court that passes final ruling on whether to uphold or reject the vote.
context so as to allow for a better appreciation of the significance of the scandal and the protests that surrounded it. Notwithstanding the central actors dominating news coverage of the story – President Park, her confidant Choi Soon-sil, major Korean corporations, university presidents, and Korean protesters – the current political situation represents a critical historical juncture that in tangible ways brings to fulfillment the legacies of both authoritarianism and democratization in South Korea.

II. Authoritarian Legacies

Reconciling the decades of authoritarian rule by military despots with the more digestible image of South Korea as a democratic capitalist nation is not always easy. The promise of a democratic Korea, the stated goal when the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea attempted to establish an independent Korean nation-state in 1948 following World War II, proved to be a hollow one as the peninsula splintered under Cold War pressures. Though hopes had run high among the Korean people, who justifiably demanded and expected a new era of freedom and prosperity after their liberation from the Japanese in 1945, the division into the Republic of Korea in the South and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea in the North would irrevocably compromise the democratic transitions of both countries. The liberty and freedom promised in 1948 gave way to security and development in the realpolitik context of the nascent Cold War. Justified by the directive to “contain communism,” South Korea was ruled by successive authoritarian leaders since its founding to 1987, when direct presidential elections were reinstated.
The omnipresence of North Korea in the political and social consciousness of the Korean people motivated the development of a national-security state in South Korea. South Korean leaders, beginning with Syngman Rhee (elected in 1948), used the threat from the North as a rationale for securing extra-constitutional executive powers. Former Major General Park Chung Hee, who succeeded Rhee as President of South Korea, consistently relied on the security threat to buttress his authoritarian policies in the 1960s, and then to secure the transition to formal authoritarianism in 1972 through the “Yusin” reforms. Another military strongman, Chun Doo Hwan, continued the authoritarian system after Park Chung Hee’s assassination in 1979, and ruled with an iron hand until democratic transition in 1987.

The “Park Chung Hee era” (1961-1979) was a particularly important period for the trajectory of the young nation (Kim & Vogel, 2011). It was Park Chung Hee, father of the impeached Park Geun-hye, who orchestrated the economic development of the country; what became known as the “miracle on the Han river.” The long-term impact of his government’s industrialization drive is only rivaled by his political legacy as the Yusin system institutionalized authoritarian structures that provided the political base for subsequent autocratic rulers. Hindsight makes it easier to see the connections between South Korea’s past history of authoritarianism with the current political situation. Casting a long shadow over the political scandal and drama enveloping Park Geun-hye is the death of her mother Yuk Yŏngsu who was murdered during a failed assignation attempt on her father Park Chung Hee on August 15, 1974. After her mother’s death, Park Geun-hye was thrust into the spotlight as the de facto first lady of the nation as she accompanied her father in
public ceremonial events to commemorate various economic and industrial achievements (e.g., reaching certain export goals, the completion of a grand infrastructure project, etc.).

Although comparisons with the father tended toward sensationalism and exaggeration when the daughter was elected president in 2012 (e.g., “she represented a return to dictatorship”), the personal connection would continue to be a salient part of Park Geun-hye’s identity through both her presidency and impeachment process. The connection, at least for some segments of Korean society, first worked in her favor. Park Geun-hye reminded some Koreans, especially among the older generations, of the optimistic spirit of progress that was a dominant cultural force during the 1960s and 1970s. Notwithstanding the objective poverty affecting the majority of the Korean people during the earlier decades of industrialization, Park Chung Hee’s government exuded the “can do” spirit that motivated citizens to work hard to build the nation (Lee, 2006). The contemporary precarity of economic and social life – manifest in the high unemployment rate, high suicide rate, breakdown of traditional family structures, etc. – drove some to support Park Geun-hye who potentially could bring back the “golden age” of South Korean development. For others, of course, the connection with her father was an ominous one, reminding them of the hard-fought movement for democracy that South Korea supposedly no longer needed after the transition to democratic governance in 1987.
III. Democratization Legacies

“Minjung Theology is dead.” This obituary was whispered to me with more than a hint of regret by a third generation minjung theologian during a research trip to South Korea. The “minjung” (a term to denote the masses, or the “people”) was a hallmark of South Korea’s democracy movement. But as ubiquitous as the minjung sentiment was in the 1980s, manifest not only in political rhetoric but also in music, art, literature, philosophy, and theology, you would be hard-pressed to find remnants of it today in South Korean politics and society. While some lament the death of the democracy movement—a “glorious” movement when the people rose up to fight tyranny and injustice—others see it as the natural trajectory of a nation that made the transition to democracy.

Social psychologists have been telling us for years that ingroup identity and solidarity are a function of outgroup contention (Tajfel, 1981). It should come as no surprise then that Korean activists fighting a dictatorial system for decades would develop a concept of the collective-self that bears all the hallmarks of an oppositional social identity; where individual-level attributes (e.g., meaning, self-esteem, and purpose) are tied to membership in various movement generations. Throughout the authoritarian period, from the 1960s to 1987, multiple generations of progressive activists emerged to claim the democracy that had been promised to them in 1948. The contest between democracy advocates and successive authoritarian governments was bitter and often violent, leading to the torture of civilians and an unknown number of deaths. The 1970s, in particular, are considered by many to be the “dark age for democracy”
in Korea. And yet, at the same time, it was in the crucible of this repressive decade that a sustained movement for democracy emerged (Chang, 2015), before the movement coalesced into massive forms of collective action in 1987 (Kim, 2000; Kim, 2016).

The connections between these past democracy movements to the recent candlelight protests are both direct and indirect. Regarding the coalitional strategies pursued by the organizers of the candlelight protests, Kim, Kim, and Lee(2018)’s recent analysis highlights the importance of dissident memory and collective identity based on “networks that have been built over decades among South Korean social movements” (Kim et al., 2018: 4). Their approach is distinct because it identifies the need to differentiate the factors contributing to organizational coalitions vs. individual “ordinary” citizens’ participation in the protests, the latter being a salient characterization of the candlelight protests. In building their argument, the authors trace the salient symbol and tactic of the recent protests, the candlelight, to prior mass mobilization in 2002 and 2008.

And while this relatively recent history is important for the particular use of the candlelight as a tactic and symbol, we might perhaps reach further back in history to understand the foundational elements of the movement. Specifically, I believe the 1970s was the critical decade when varying sectors of what was at that time a nascent civil society first emerged and evolved into meaningful coalitions. That is, the 1970s protest generation against the Yusin system is when we see new influential models of organizational coalitions. While it is true that some groups, students of course, attempted to create nation-wide coalitions in the 1960s, it was not until the 1970s that we have for the first time the politicization of new social movement actors: journalists, labor, Christians, farmers,
human rights lawyers, etc. (Chang, 2015).

This diversification of new movement actors in the 1970s made it possible for new inter-sector alliances that I believe were even more significant that the intra-group alliances in the 1960s. The story of students’ and Christians’ involvement in the labor movement during that time is already quite well-known, but it was also the decade of formal cross-sector coalitional organizations such as: the Citizens Council for the Protection of Democracy (Minju Suho Kungmin Hyŏbŭihoe founded in 1971), Citizens’ Democracy Alliance (Minjujuŭi Kungmin Yŏnhap founded in 1978), Citizens’ Alliance for Democracy and National Unification (Minjujuŭi wa Minjok T’ongil ūl wihan Kungmin Yŏnhap founded in 1979). And this precedent in the 1970s of course became models for the coalitions leading the 1987 protests: People’s Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (Minju T’ongil Minjung Undong Yŏnhap founded in 1985) and the National Movement Headquarters for Securing a Democratic Constitution (Minju Hŏnpop Chaengch’wi Kungmin Undong Ponbu founded in 1987). It is hard to imagine that the “coalition of over 1,550 organizations from around the country” (Kim et al, 2018: 3) that led the candlelight protests in 2016-2017 would have been possible without this earlier history.

IV. The End of Korean History?

Advocates for democracy gained a decisive victory in 1987 when direct presidential elections were reestablished. Since that transition, the democratic system in South Korea has continued to mature, marked by
several important events: the establishment of the first civilian government in 1992, first peaceful transfer of power to an opposition liberal party in 1997, and the peaceful return to power of the conservative party in 2007. While these events signal the real progress of democratic procedures in South Korea, the legacies of authoritarianism and the decades-long fight for democracy produced deep cleavages in South Korean society, characterized by the polarization that separates not only institutional political parties, but the population as a whole.

For all of the dramatic headlines about the debilitating costs associated with the polarization of American politics in recent years, the inability of political parties and factions to engage in constructive debate and dialogue is arguably a greater problem in newer democracies. After all, when was the last time we saw congressional debates escalate into physical fighting between American legislatures on the Floor of the Senate or House of Representatives? While this might be unimaginable in America it is, unfortunately, a relatively common occurrence in institutional politics in some Asian nations. In 2012, for example, members of the Thai parliament rushed the House Speaker, Somsak Kiatsuranont, who had attempted to force a discussion of a controversial “reconciliation bill” that Democrat MPs rejected. Between the grabbing and pulling, and under the swirl of documents flying through the air, Somsak Kiatsuranont hurried off the parliament floor behind the protection of security forces (Fredrickson, 2012). This and other examples of physical fighting amongst legislators (e.g., Taiwan parliament fighting in 2004, 2006, 2007) are perhaps the clearest and most visible manifestation of polarization in institutional politics.

Scholarship on the consequences of social movements has moved
beyond assessing the immediate results of mobilization to look at the unintended long-term impact of collective action on state and society. In a recent article, McVeigh, Cunningham, and Farrell (2014) proposed a compelling explanation for the political polarization we see in some regions of America today: Ku Klux Klan activism in the 1960s “exacerbated deep divisions” in the American south which polarized local communities with some white voters shifting party allegiance from the Democratic to the Republican Party, a move that was reinforced by the “restructuring of social relationships” in local settings (McVeigh et al., 2014: 1146, 1148). This political realignment at the local level contributed to the durability of polarization which, in turn, explains the “(American) South’s (current) strong ties to the national Republican Party” (McVeigh, et al., 2014: 1145).

The larger implications of their argument for South Korea are readily apparent, given that political polarization can compromise the stability of governments and is a factor for why some democracies collapse (Diskin, Diskin, & Hazan, 2005). South Korea, along with Taiwan, is infamous for the physical altercations that have taken place between members of parliament over the years. As some scholars have noted, the admittedly embarrassing images of legislators punching, kicking, and clawing, reflect deep cleavages in South Korea (Suh, Chang, & Lim, 2012). Indeed, as Lee (2005) laments, South Korean society and politics before Park Geun-hye’s impeachment was “more fragmented than ever before” (Lee, 2005: 102). Has the Park Geun-hye and Choi Soon-sil scandal, along with the candlelight protests with its massive participation numbers, contributed to closing some of this gap?

In his controversial book The End of History and the Last Man, Francis
Fukuyama (1992) forwarded the provocative argument that the liberal democratic system may very well represent the pinnacle of human government and thus the end of political evolution. Notwithstanding the explicit normative undercurrent in his teleological explanation of the evolution of political thought and human governance, it is worth contemplating the larger implications of Park Geun-hye’s impeachment, conviction, and imprisonment. As noted above, the authoritarian period began with the military coup d’état that brought to power Major General Park Chung Hee in May 1961. For nearly four decades successive military strongmen assumed political charge of South Korea, justifying their rule through modernization and development. And although this history led to polarized politics and society, perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the recent scandal and candlelight protests was that they galvanized even conservative segments of the general population and were able to draw in the youth who were written off as apathetic. If Park Chung Hee marks the start of Korean authoritarianism, then the fate of Park Guen-hye represents to many a certain closure and end to that history.
References

Beissinger, M. R. (2007). Structure and example in modular political phenomena: The diffusion of Bulldozer/Rose/Orange/Tulip revolutions. *Perspectives on Politics, 5*(2), 259-276.

Chang, P. Y. (2015). *Protest dialectics: State repression and South Korea’s democracy movement, 1970-1979*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Diskin, A., Diskin, H., & Hazan, R. Y. (2005). Why democracies collapse: The reasons for democratic failure and success. *International Political Science Review, 26*(3), 291-309.

Fredrickson, T. (2012). Chaos in parliament: Day 3, *Bangkok Post*, June 1, 2012.

Fukuyama, F. (1992). *The end of history and the last Man*. New York: Avon Books.

Kelly, R. E. (2016). South Korea’s most bizarre corruption scandal yet. *The Diplomat*. Retrieved January 13, 2017, from http://thediplomat.com/2016/11/south-koreas-most-bizarre-corruption-scandal-yet/.

Ketchley, N. (2017). *Egypt in a time of revolution: Contentious politics and the Arab Spring*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, B. K., & Ezra F. Vogel (eds.). (2011). *The Park Chung Hee Era: The transformation of South Korea*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Kim, N., Kim, Seongnae, & Lee, Francis D. (2018). ‘Sustaining solidarities: Grounded practices for progressive coalition-building in South Korea’. Paper presented at the Association for Asian Studies Annual Meeting, Washington DC.

Kim, S. (2000). *The politics of democratization in Korea: The role of civil*
society. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Kim, S. C. (2016). Democratization and social movements in South Korea: Defiant institutionalism. London: Routledge.

Lee, B. C. (2006). Developmental dictatorship and the Park Chung Hee Era: The shaping of modernity in the Republic of Korea. Paramus: Homa and Sekey Books.

Lee, S. J. (2005). Democratization and polarization in Korean society. Asian Perspective, 29(3), 99-125.

McVeigh, R., Cunningham, D., & Farrell, J. (2014). Political polarization as a social movement outcome: 1960s Klan activism and its enduring impact on political realignment in Southern Counties, 1960 to 2000. American Sociological Review, 79(6), 1144-1171.

Suh, C. S., Chang, P. Y., & Lim, Y. (2012, June). Spill-Up and spill-over of trust: An extended test of cultural and institutional theories of trust in South Korea. Sociological Forum (Vol. 27, No. 2, pp. 504-526). Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Tajfel, H. (1981). Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.