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Game Theory

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Protests in Democracy:

Is the South Korean Democracy Working?

The end of the World War II was a start to a newly independent Korea. However, the happiness of independence did not last too long, since the end of World War II brought another war, a war we now know as the Cold War. The two big Western Powers, United States and the Soviet Union, created tension based on their two drastically different ideologies, splitting Korea into two. The southern half of Korea, under the American military, took the name of Republic of Korea—commonly known as South Korea—, and formed a democratic government implemented by the United States. Since then, for the past 70 years, South Korea continued its legacy as a democratic country. The South Korean democracy seems to have kept a smooth balance between the ideals and realistic downsides of democracy without much trouble. However, in this young democratic country, more than enough has happened to form a working democracy, thanks to the power of protests. While many protests in South Korea concluded partially unsuccessfully with no clear positive effects, many others have put the government and the country in action: laws have changed, presidents have either fled the country or have been impeached. Whether it is a Korean heritage to gather together to express the general consensus or it is the democratic characteristic for citizens to actively seek ways to express their opinion, protesting in South Korea has provided a realistic alternative for an uncommunicative system

between the government and the people. Throughout the history of modern Korea, the culture of protest has developed and advanced, exemplifying where South Korea lies as a democratic country and foreseeing the future path that South Korea should take.

Phase 1: Japanese Colonization Era (1910s to 1940s)

Protests and demonstration have a long history in Korea. It dates all the way back to the period of Three Kingdoms of Korea, but the modernized demonstrations initially occurred during the Japanese colonization period. The 3.1 Movement in 1919 sparked the continuous and long fight between the Koreans and the Japanese colonizers. On March 1st of 1919, 33 leaders from various religions leading the movement proclaimed the Declaration of Independence, and thousands of people gathered at the Pagoda Park in Seoul, named *Kyeong-song* at that time, to show their discontent with the Japanese control (Image 1). In this movement, high school and college students played a big role of mobilizing the movement, and the merchants took the role of spreading the words from *Kyeong-song* to all across Korea. Although the protests had no intention to be violent, the Japanese police started using force to oppress the citizens. Such response from the Japanese government did not scare the Koreans away, but rather brought more rage out to the streets. Unfortunately, other than the Japanese government appealing some regulations on education and censorship on media, the 3.1 Movement did not bring significant change to the Korean society nor did it bring ultimate independence. However, it kindled the long fight between the Koreans who were dissatisfied with the Japanese control and the Japanese government that tried to keep the Koreans under its control. Currently, March 1st is designated as a national holiday to celebrate the beginning of the fight for Korean independence. The protests that happened in this era, including the 3.1 Movement neither brought sufficient result— independence—nor has strong connection to democracy, but they set the foundations for

successful demonstration in the democratic system. They gave the Korean people the opportunity to realize that even against a strong, abusive government, once the people stand up together, the government will react in some way rather than neglect.

Phase 2: Era of Modernization and Democratization (1950s to 1980s)

The next phase of protest came during the time of modernization and democratization, from the 1950s to late 1980s. During these times, the primary goal for the protests was not independence but democracy. The movements and protests that occurred in this era have similar motives and means, but depending on how each president at the time responded, the results were significantly different.ⁱ The movements in this era displayed higher civic awareness, but lacked the preparation for potential outcomes.

Despite the Korean's will to set up a new Korea after its independence was restored, the Soviet Union and the United States entered the country, dividing Korea into half—many consider this to be the start of the Cold War. Naturally, North Korea formed a communist government under the Soviet's orders with Kim Il-sung as the leader. In the south, The US military government stationed in South Korea chose Rhee Seungman as a qualified person to lead South Korea into a democratic society, fully supporting him to become president in South Korea.ⁱⁱ Thus started the South Korean democracy, but as Jung Hae Gu and Kim Ho Ki, two professors specializing in Korean sociology and social sciences, stated, Korea was a “strong state originated from an anticommunist state strong coercive power.” In short, President Rhee transformed his presidency into a dictatorship through the manipulation of the *democratic* South Korean relationship with the *communist* North Korea. For a country that barely recovered from the trauma and damage from a strict and merciless colonization period, the people definitely did not welcome such oppressive and strong government. Ultimately, President Rhee's greed and

corruption crossed the line and rigged the election to his favor, pulling the trigger that brought the citizens out to the street. College students took to the lead on to the streets calling the start to the April 19th Revolution of 1960, which ultimately led to President Rhee's flee to Hawaii. This revolution was neither initiated nor led by the opposition party, but by the citizens who were in need for a better democracy for the country.ⁱⁱⁱ Therefore, through the April 19th Revolution of 1960, South Koreans showed the potential improvement towards a real democracy rather than a pseud-democracy on which corrupted powers can parasite.

Unfortunately, the spring of the South Korean democracy was yet to come, since in less than a year from the April 19th Revolution of 1960, Park Chunghee, a military general, made way into the Blue House through a military coup on May 16th, 1961. For nearly two decades, Park used his unconditional authority to both boost the Korean economy and suppress the people. However, as the economy skyrocketed, so did the living standards and the political and social awareness of the people. Now that people can afford, they realized that President Park's government was absurd and was not a democracy in any interpretation. People went out to the streets once again, but this time, the fight was long. Although the protests always started as peaceful ones, President Park would use his military force to create violence. In 1975, he would even proclaim Emergency Decree No. 9 so that he can easily manipulate the media and control the people. The battle between President Park and the people did not stop until he was assassinated by his own subordinate, Kim Jaegyu, who chose the extreme thinking its now or never to stop the president's rage.^{iv}

The death of a brutal dictator could be viewed as the blossom of real democracy, but with the lack of planning beforehand and lack of strong power in the Blue House, another military leader filled the vacancy. Chun Doo Hwan, another military general, used similar tactics to

President Park's, oppressing the people, censoring the media, and dictating the pseudo-democratic South Korea. Thus, the people did not stop the fight against the government.

President Chun believed that oppression would give him more authority, not acknowledging that oppression instigates more anger on the people. On March 18th of 1980, President Chun ordered the military to close off Kwangju, a city in the Southwest of South Korea, and used the military force to massacre the whole city. This unbelievably atrocious incident is still reminded to the South Koreans as the Kwangju Uprising (Image 2). President Chun erroneously assumed that such scary happening can be easily blamed to the North Korea and their nonsense communists and can also teach the people a lesson that rebelling against the government will bring no good. However, the people were not going to just nod on and obey. They had been through such oppression for decades and they were not going to bear it anymore. The 'Spring of Seoul' of the 1980 was the symbol of people's high hopes in a real democracy. It brought the students back on to the streets. Tear gas, water bomb, and potential jailing did not stop the South Koreans from yearning for a better country. The fight continued for more than 8 years, until the military government slowly crumbled down and gradually gave way to a more sensible democracy.^v As time passed, the military government and their military-based leaders began to learn about the power that people's indomitable will had. These people were willing to lose everything they own and sacrifice them for the better of the country.

Phase 3: 21st Century

Coming into the 21st century, the South Korean democracy took a more logical and sensible route as the military government era died down. As democracy progressed, the culture of protest followed. Instead of banners with aggressive looking propagandas and protesters with white headbands to show their passion, people took this time to gather around and enjoy the

moments they have with people who hold similar thoughts. Holding up candles, South Koreans still expressed their dissatisfactions, but protests included small concerts, open-mics, free food, and a lot of festivity.^{vi}

The most recent but the most remarkable protest in South Korea was the 2016 protest against the president Park Geunhye, the daughter of the assassinated President Park. Once the students of Ehwa Women's University exposed her unlawful relationship with the cult leader, Choi Sunsil, the Korean citizens were raged and furious at her undemocratic behaviors and affiliation. They could no longer deal with the nonsense happening in the Blue House. For over 3 months, hundreds of thousands of citizens occupied the streets of Seoul and other majors cities, proclaiming their anger and clearly expressing their needs for the impeachment of President Park and to purge the corrupted government—the underground ties between the legislative, jurisdiction, and administration was so deep that they even influenced the entertainment and science field (Image 3). While people showed up to express their rage, the whole get together seemed more like a festival than a mob of angry people. People sang parody songs, chanted slogans, wore mocking costumes, and enjoyed the protest as if it was a carnival (Image 4). The protesting lasted for more than 3 months, but the zeal never seemed to die down. Instead, more people showed up as time went by. Such peaceful but impactful representation of the consensus in the South Korean people ultimately bore fruits. More than the majority the South Korean National Assembly agreed that President Park should be impeached. Such successful outcome was also a surprise to the people, since almost majority of the parliament was consisted of the ruling party that the president was associated with. Once again, the power of the people was proven. Not too much later, the South Korean Constitutional Court unanimously approved the impeachment. Unlike the times of President Park of the 1970s (father of the impeached President

Park) and President Chun, the country was quick in scraping out the remaining corruption and fill in the vacant spots in the government.^{vii} The aftermath of the 2016 protest clearly portrays a big improvement in the protesting culture of South Korea, too. In the past, the craze that lead the democratic movements eventually came to nothing, because people were not ready to deal with what was to come next. However, by 2016, both the people and the South Korean democracy were ready to handle the outcomes of mass protest, and quickly fill up vacancies in the government so that tainted forces will not occupy them.

Analysis

Not all movements and protests that occurred in the modern Korean history had happy endings. However, all had critical impacts on what they were aiming for. As time progressed the art of protesting developed, taking in various lessons from the mistakes and flaws of previous movements. The biggest change was the atmosphere of the demonstrations. During the Japanese colonization era and the modernization and democratization era, people were mad and angry, and their protesting clearly depicted their emotional status. The banners had bold, aggressive slogans and the songs they chanted were forceful and sonorous. Although the people tended not to start violence, they were ready to fight back to the violence that would come to them. On the other hand, in the 21st century, people turned their anger and rage into something that they can enjoy. After years of experience out on the streets, people realized that protesting does not have to be solemn and negative for it to be effective. Eventually, protesting is for the benefit of the country, thus the change itself should be celebrated, not graved. Therefore, aggressive slogans turned into humors and parodies, and chants turned into cheerful and hopeful songs, even popular K-pop songs. People also learned that the best way to deal with violence is not to fight back, but to neglect it and maintain peaceful behaviors.

For the protests in the 21st century, there are no doubt the protests worked. A working form of democracy settled down in the Korean government and as the media became some much more independent and took different means to reach people—not just the ordinary newspapers and news on TV, but through the Internet and social media. Words spread quickly, and corruption was easily exposed. Yes, the protests ultimately worked, with the people getting what they need. However, would the South Koreans be taking the trouble of going out to the streets if the South Korean government was already listening to the needs of the people and responded?

In the Chosun Dynasty, the last kingdom in the Korean peninsula before the Japanese colonization, good kings implemented a system called the *Simmungo*. A drum was installed in front of the castle gate. If the people wanted to let the king know about their sorrows and troubles, they come and play this drum to get the attention of the king.^{viii} The communication between the governed and the governing is crucial for a country to improve further on. However, once the source of any communication is cut off or one side of this relationship neglects the other side's complaint and opinions, problems occur, especially in a democratic setting. So, when people cannot reach the government to make the country a better place, they act upon it. And protesting has been used as one of the most intuitive and useful tool. In other words, protesting can mean a lack of communication between the governing and the governed in a certain democratic setting. Since in an ideal democracy all constituents should be able to voice their opinions with ease, the fact that protests often occur in democratic countries may lead to the false assumption that democracy with protests are a failure.

However, demonstrations may seem like a side-effect of a dysfunctional democracy, but in a world where an ideal democracy is impossible, protest should be viewed more of a means to develop democracy rather than a residue of failed democracy. In fact, compared to other more

violent forms of expressing complaints, the protests that have occurred in Korea has been quite mannerly, respectable, and democratic. For example, most recent 2016 protest is being portrayed as the cleanest protest in various aspects. There was almost no violent arousal except for a few outliers. Even when violence seems to form between two opposing groups, it was the people on streets protesting who voluntarily prevented the violence from spreading any further and settled down the issue. In addition, it was safe enough for parents to bring their children out to the streets with them, and allow them to be a part of the historical moment. It was also clean in the literal sense that once the protesters pulled out for the day, the streets were back to its normal state with all the trash collected and cleaned, despite the fact that thousands of people came by along with their slogans, lights, food, etc.^{ix} The protests may have shown the downside of the South Korea democracy and its lack of communication, but they are also opportunities to look at how far citizenship in the people has risen.

In a democratic setting, protesting is a sign of mature civic awareness in a less mature government. There would be no need of protesting if the government is already doing its work and fulfill what the people want. However, the world is not perfect, and thus there are limits to how perfect democracy can be. Unless South Korea decides to implement another system of politics in the far future, protesting will continue and thrive. It had been, has been, and will be a source of major transformation in the political world. It will also be the symptom of a healthy, on-going democracy.



Image 1: 3.1 Movement at the Pagoda Park, Seoul^x



Image 2: The citizens of Kwangju during the Kwangju Uprising^{xi}



Figure 3: Candlelight protest against President Park in 2016^{xii}



Image 4: Protesters at the 2016 Protest mocking President Park and Choi Sun Sil with masks^{xiii}

ⁱ Jung and Kim, "Development of Democratization Movement in South Korea."

ⁱⁱ Cummings, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History*.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jung and Kim, "Development of Democratization Movement in South Korea."

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Oh, "Strong State and Strong Civil Society in Contemporary South Korea."

^{vii} Premack, "Koreans Have Mastered the Art of the Protest."

^{viii} Ibid.

^{ix} Ahrens, "South Koreans Are Showing the World How Protests Can Work."

^x Yoo, "South Korea Celebrates 96th Anniversary Of Independence Movement Day."

^{xi} "Massacre at Kwangju."

^{xii} Taylor, "South Korean Protesters Ask Their President to Leave."

^{xiii} Jozuka, "South Korean Prosecutors to Question President Park as Protests Swell."

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