

Korea's Candlelight Revolution and Participatory Democracy

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Former President Park Geun-hye was found guilty and sentenced to 24 years in jail, but it was the citizens of Korea whose massive candlelight rallies in October 2016–March 2017 turned public opinion.



Candlelight Rallies (October 2016–March 2017)

The dramatic demonstration of people power on the streets, called the “Candlelight Revolution,” was sparked off by President Park’s abuse of power and corruption. She had shared classified information on state affairs with her close confidantes, including Ms. Choi Soon-sil, and she is alleged to have taken bribes from conglomerates, advancing her private interests, and also abused power by oppressing people critical of her government through the mobilization of state power.

The number of protesters rose rapidly since the first candlelight vigil on October 29, 2016, and exceeded 2 million in Seoul alone in early December that year. Caving in to mounting pressure from citizens, the National Assembly passed an impeachment motion against President Park Geun-hye in which 234 of the 300 lawmakers in the National Assembly (78%) voted in favor of impeachment. Pending the final decision by the Constitutional Court, the mass rallies lasted throughout the winter and the court finally upheld the motion to impeach the president unanimously on March 11, 2017. She was sentenced on April 6, 2018, to 24 years in prison.

Later that year, in early presidential elections on May 9, 2017, Moon Jae-in, the candidate of the main opposition party, won the election. That was the last part of the first phase of the Candlelight Revolution.

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More than 2,300 civic groups in 70 cities joined the Emergency Citizen Action for Park Geun-hye's Resignation (called the Emergency Citizen Action) which led the weekly candlelight rallies. The Emergency Citizen Action estimated that more than 16 million people cumulatively took to the streets during the period.



Participants of the Candlelight Rallies (October 2016-March 2017)

Who Were “We”?

We have to be careful in defining the main players and the characteristics of this eruption of civic activism. So many people joined in, and were sympathetic to it, that it is difficult to pinpoint the protagonists.

The civic groups that joined the Emergency Citizen Action were largely progressive or reformist in nature. However, according to the results of a survey, 32.8% of respondents said they participated in the rally and a whopping 39% identified themselves as progressives, but not a small percentage of respondents labeled themselves as centrists (19.4%) or conservatives (17.3%).²

On the other hand, opinion polls revealed as much as 70%–80% of respondents favored the impeachment. A similar percentage (78%) of lawmakers at the National Assembly voted in favor of impeachment.

Members of conventional social movement organizations or groups made up only a small proportion of the people who filled the Plaza. A majority of protesters were voluntary participants. However, they could not be dubbed as the unorganized masses. They formed a variety of networks via social media and used the Plaza as a place to meet. Some of the groups just gathered spontaneously on the Plaza. Street musicians' bands came together, and anybody who could play an instrument played it and sang together till late into the night.

² [In and Out of Impeachment Plaza' Ji-ho Lee, Hyun-woo Lee, Bok-gyung Seo] Was the Candlelight Revolution Mobilized by Leftists? “Voluntary Participation together with Friends and Families,” excerpt from Naeil Shin-moon article July 25, 2017. http://www.naeil.com/news_view/?id_art=245301

Those Who Are Not “All Right”

The huge turnout was an indication that the participants felt that they had to be there for justice reform that would affect their lives—regardless of their political orientation.

The people were outraged by the Park Geun-hye/Choi Soon-sil scandal because it indicated that the political system was flawed and was full of special privileges, irregularities, and inequalities. It did not have the public good as a priority, the malfunctioning old politics prevailed, and this fueled the anger on the streets. There were many grievances: extreme economic polarization, declining birth rates and an aging population, degradation to non-regular workers and youth unemployment, household debts hitting the limit, a shrinking job market despite the toughest competition for college entrance in the world, and the highest suicide rate in the world. All these combined to kindle the candles in the streets.

The tragedy of the *Sewol* ferry disaster deserves special mention as one of the driving forces of the Candlelight Revolution. The disaster occurred on April 16 in 2014 and has been the most important keyword³ for the last three years in Korea. Its impact on Korea was as tremendous as the Fukushima nuclear disaster's impact on Japan.

People at the candlelight rally were questioning “Is this a country?” and those sighing “There was no country” after the ferry disaster expressed exactly the same indignation and sense of crisis. The question “What the country means to me?” was posed in despair. That sense of despair about the fate and future of the country (which young people call “Hell Joseon”) was a dominant question echoing on the streets.

The Candlelight Revolution showed the dynamism of civil society and the tradition of participatory democracy in Korea, but at the same time it exposed the crisis that representative democracy was facing. Civil uprisings that have erupted at every crucial moment of Korean history and massive voluntary candlelight rallies that have taken place periodically in 2002, 2004, 2008, and 2016 are closely related to the failure of Korean politics to respond to public opinion and solve problems through political action.

Newly Discovered Democracy

A significant change during the Candlelight Revolution period was that the fantasy about the Park Chung-hee era (dominated by the doctrine of developmental dictatorship) was finally shattered as the details of influence-peddling by Park Geun-hye/Choi Soon-il became public. Henceforth, it will be increasingly difficult for future governments to scapegoat and subordinate individuals for the sake of “national interest” or “national security.”

Political and social conditions are now ripe to re-design a new Korea. Obviously, “democracy” which had been treated as an outdated term is receiving attention again thanks to candle-carrying citizens at the Plaza. Awareness has been raised that if participatory democracy does not take root via citizens' pro-active involvement, the people's livelihoods and welfare cannot be guaranteed and special privileges and irregularities will be rampant. Citizens have

³ “Keywords at the Plaza, the words President Park were most frequently mentioned, followed by candlelight and Sewol ferry,” excerpt from JoongAng Ilbo article, December 12, 2016; “Keywords of 2016 ‘Park Geun-hye, Choi Soon-sil, Sewol ferry,’” *Yonhap News*, December 19, 2016. <http://news.joins.com/article/20990392>; <http://www.yonhapnews.co.kr/bulletin/2016/12/18/0200000000AKR20161218038300033.HTML?input=1195m>

regained confidence that they can change the world on their own and confirmed that their participation leads to changes in politics and social structure.⁴

The experience and recognition of Korea's Candlelight Revolution is a lesson for people all over the world that peaceful street action by citizens can still lead to justice and political reform, despite neo-liberalism and regression in many parts of the world.

The contents of this article reflect solely the opinions of the author.

⁴ “Since the candlelight rally, views on the rally changed. Views on the rally were initially negative but changed drastically to positive.”: Reporter Min-woo Lee, ‘cumulative number of participants at 16 million’ scale of the candlelight protest, matching survey results, excerpt from Sisa Journal article, March 17, 2017. <http://www.sisapress.com/journal/article/166187>