

South Korean Candle Light Protest 2016, President Park's Impeachment and the Future of Democracy

Friday 9 December 2016, by [WON Youngsu](#) (Date first published: 9 December 2016).

On December 9th, the Parliament voted for the presidential impeachment by 234 votes against 56, with 7 invalid votes and 2 abstentions. Over 30,000 protesters hailed the impeachment. The result was more votes than expected, though slightly lower than the 81 percent pro-impeachment of public opinion.

Contents

- [The biggest political scandal](#)
- [Park versus party politics \(...\)](#)
- [Media's role and the limit \(...\)](#)
- [The evolution of candle light](#)
- [Candles in the historical \(...\)](#)
- [Social movements and candle](#)
- [Beyond the impeachment](#)

Since late October, in spite of mounting pressure to step down, Park Geunhye has refused to resign, searching for a political solution, neither resignation nor impeachment. However, her every manoeuvre to retain presidency failed and her presidency stopped functioning.

A series of ever-growing million-strong protests forced the parliamentarians to finalise the impeachment process. Especially, 2.3 million mega-protest of December 3rd was a critical turning point that failed Park's last attempt to escape from impeachment.

South Koreans were angry with not just ruling Saenuri Party, but also opposition parties, which oscillated, without any plan or determination, at every turn of Park's so-called apology speeches. The huge mobilisations on every weekend of November up to last Saturday's mega-protest put swelling pressure toward main stream political parties, both ruling and opposition.

The biggest political scandal ever

This historic battle began as a dispute between the Blue House and a conservative Daily Chosun, whose concerns as a royal opposition was despised by Park and her lackeys. Investigative journalists led a series of shocking revelations of Choi Soonshil's various power abuses and extortions of public fund under Park's connivance or cooperation, as well as personal amoral behaviours.

The prosecution arrested Choi and her accomplices; personal business agents like Cha Eun-taek, a music video director, and Jang Shi-ho, her nephew; presidential secretaries like Ahn Jongbeom & Jeong Hoseong; and government high officials like Kim Jong, former Deputy Minister of Culture and

Sport Department, and others.

Using her 40 year-long friendship with Park, Choi wielded enormous power as a eminence gras since Park became President in 2013. The most shocking news was that she revised Park's speeches, which was exposed by JTBC's report based on Choi's tablet PC. And Choi was deeply involved in establishing two foundations, Mir Foundation and K Sprot Foundation, which were founded with millions of dollars allegedly donated by major Chaebols, that is, Samsung, Hyundai, SK, Lotte, and so on. In fact, these mysterious foundations were used as a conduit for financial extortion and money laundry.

In addition, Jung Yura, Cho's daughter, became a spotlight in that she enjoyed illegitimate privileges, such as financial help from National Horseriding Association and her admission to Ewha Women's University through irregular procedures. Choi commanded Cha and Jang as her business agents in securing the government contracts related with sport and culture spheres.

Choi's hidden power and privilege worked like a magic, wielding hundreds of millions of dollar budgets, through her private paper companies in Korea and Germany. This hardly known women was a big shot behind the president. Mystery was finally solved, and the Pandora's box of truth was open.

Park versus party politics over the impeachemnt

The crisis of Park's regime was already coming. In the general election of last April, the ruling Sanuri Party suffered from a huge defeat, losing majority. Several dissidents who were expelled from the ruling party won seats and the opposition parties won a majority in spite of splits. Thus, though the defeat was caused by arrogant abuses of the pro-Park faction and unfair selection of candidates, the pro-Park faction kept leadership, defying the popular opinion.

Lee Jeongheyon took the leadership due to his obstinate royalty to the president, and his improper remakes were widely ridiculed, thus Sanuri Party was seriously stricken with crisis. As the Choi-Park scandal exposed, the party was divided along the factional line. The minority Non-Park faction joined the opposition in criticising the scandals and the president. The majority Pro-Park faction was isolated, and desperate acts by some MPs to defend the president invoked a huge backlash of popular anger.

The opposition parties Democratic Party (DP) and People's Party (PP) had the majority in the parliament, but the initial response to the scandals were rather half-hearted, following the media and public opinion. They could not propose any proper measures to cope with the crisis, wavering between a resolute struggle and a political compromise. At this initial stage, the oppositions were rather reluctant to initiated the impeachment, because they had no confidence in their capacity to secure a two-third majority.

Though they joined candle light protests, the opposition opportunistically kept some distance from the extra-parliamentary mobilisation as they regarded it as their task to purse a solution within the parliament. However, throughout the whole November, mobilisation kept on growing in a massive scale beyond their expectation, so that the opposition had no other waybut to follow popular opinion and initiate the impeachment procedure.

In face of tremendous protests, Park made the last manœuvre through her last speech on November 29th. Though she mentioned her intention to step down for the first time, she committed the job to the parliament, without mentioning any details. This move was interpreted as a manœuvre to evade

the impeachment. However, part of Non-Park faction welcomed her proposal, and decided not to join the impeachment, on the condition that the president would clarify the precise date of resignation.

However, the mega-protest of December 3rd clearly expressed the will of indignant people: the immediate, unconditional resignation of the president. Under a mounting pressure, the dissents of the ruling party gave up a political solution through compromise, joining the oppositions for the impeachment. Thus, not Non-Park faction, but Pro-Park faction was exposed to public eyes, and the path to the impeachment was clearly paved.

Media's role and the limit of its hegemony

In this historic battle, the media, especially conservative media, played a key role, in that every day from late October till now media exposed a vast range of power abuse, bribery, and irregularities. Countless unjustified, illegal and illegitimate acts of Park and Choi, and their accomplices were reported on daily basis. Some of cable TV networks dealt the scandals around the clock.

Basically, the mass media in South Korea are mostly privately owned by conservative media mogul, or strongly linked with and big businesses. Thus, on the whole, conservative newspapers and cable TV networks supported Park and her conservative government. Some of them were an vulgar outlet of the anti-communist, anti-North rightwing extremists.

On the other hand, progressive or liberal media are smaller in size and their influence is rather limited. *Hangyeoreh Shinmoon* and *Daily Gyeonghyang* criticised the government, but amongst TV networks, JTBC, though linked with Samsung, was regarded as the only anti-government media, under the influence of Sohn Seokhee who moved from the government controlled MBC.

In this crisis, JTBC's exposure of Choi Soonshil's table PC on October 24 was the decisive trigger of a whole series of the political crisis, though TV Chosun prepared for systematic attack through a more extensive coverage of the scandals. The balanced reports and democratic approach of JTBC boosted its credibility and popularity up above pro-government broadcast KBS and MBC, or other TV networks.

In a barrage of scandal exposures, the media as a whole, whether conservative, liberal or progressive, were united in criticising the corrupt government, even competing among themselves. On the whole, extensive media coverage led to a tremendous explosion of anger and indignation, ultimately to unprecedented mega-protests.

However, media were shocked at the enormous scale of mobilisation and used their influence to curdle the power of the candle light protests. Media preached the non-violence, constantly emphasising the difference of candle protests from the conventional social movement's confrontational approach. Seemingly, the hegemony of the conservative media worked and the candle light protests, though so huge beyond control, remained peaceful and civil.

December 3rd was a watershed. After Park's speech, conservative media began to advocate a political solution within the framework of law and order, without directly attacking candle light mobilisation. More and more voices from extreme rightwing pundits were audible. However, sheer size of December 3rd overwhelmed any manoeuvre of conservative media, which in turn leaned toward the inevitability of the presidential impeachment.

The dialectical, dynamic interaction between media and mass mobilisation was the key factor in determining the political path of this crisis. Initially, media seemed to dominate, but the ever-

growing candles persisted and eventually prevailed, pushing through the course of the historic struggle.

The evolution of candle light protest

Though the media exposures were shocking, the protest began as usual: a candle light vigil at the Cheonggye Square, a historical spot of the 2008 protest. On the first weekend after the JTBC's revelation, 30,000 people gathered, criticising the president and demanding her resignation.

With daily media coverage of the whole scale of the scandals, popular anger exploded, and anger at Park's speech on November 4th, 200,000 people joined the candle light protest on November 5, a sign of beginning of mega-protests. On November 12, one million strong mega-protest signified an escalation of popular protest. The scale of spontaneous mobilisation was highly explosive, breaking the record at subsequent weekend rallies as follows:

October 29	30,000
November 5	200,000
November 12	1,000,000
November 19	1,900,000
November 26	1,500,000
December 3	2,320,000

The candle light protests dominated the scene. The president's untruthful excuses and even more exposures provoked even bigger mobilisation on November 19 and 16. Now, mobilisation of millions became a norm. Park's latest speech on November 29th provoked the largest mobilisation in history.

However, reaction was never docile. The police attempted to put a strict limit on protest marches. The police set up lengthy walls of buses as a blockade around the rally spot, and did not permit to any approach near to adjunct area around Blue House.

However, the court decision defied the police bigotry. Repeatedly, the court decided that the duty of the police is to protect citizens in march, not to stop them. Thus, in each rally candle marchers could walk nearer and nearer toward the Blue House, and on December 3rd, people marched upto 100 metre parameter of the Blue House.

And in an effort to curtail the candle power, the police publicised a severely reduced number of rally participants, denying the obvious fact that more than millions join the rallies. However, media cast doubts on the calculating method by the police and confirmed the authenticity of the numbers based on alternative, scientific method.

In face of huge mobilisation, the counter-mobilisations were attempted by pro-Park reactionary groups. On weekend, counter rallies were organised, but their sizes never went beyond several thousands. Even these meagre rallies were packed with old people who were paid for joining rallies.

Candles in the historical context

Historically, after the World War II, Korea was liberated from Japanese imperialism, but divided by the Cold War politics, and suffered from the bloody hot war. After three year war, Korea was

permanently divided and South Korea was incorporated in the US-led capitalist world system, and politically, dominated by anti-communist dictatorship: Rhe Shingman (1948-1960), Park Chunghee (1960-1979) and Chun Doohwan (1980-87).

The popular struggle for democracy won April Revolution of 1960, enjoyed a short freedom in 1980 Democracy's Spring, but it was constantly under harsh suppression of the dictatorship, until June Uprising and partial victory in 1987. Since then, South Korea was regarded a formal democracy, but under conservative rule, because June Uprising could not overthrow the military dictatorship completely.

Under the auspice of IMF crisis, the regime change was made possible and democratisation slightly furthered under the 10-year liberal regime of Kim Daejung (1997-2002) and Rho Moo-hyun (2003-2007), but unfortunately combined with its neoliberal turn. After a "lost decade", the conservative forces returned to power by Lee Myeongbak (2008-12), and Park Geunhye (2013-present).

Definitely, the present conservative rule was made possible by the economic downturn and poor performance of liberals. Old generations' nostalgia of powerful leaders drove Park's popularity upward, keeping her on solid support, in spite of her anti-people, neoliberal policies.

The 2016 candle light protest is historically the continuation of the June Uprising of 1987, when students and citizens fought street battle for three weeks, winning a victory in spite of tear gas and massive arrests. 1987 paved way for democracy, but subsequent process failed to deepen democracy. In a sense, Park's government was a reactionary attempt to revive the ghost of development dictatorship of Park Chunghee.

The 2016 candle protests will decisively bury every remnant of the dictatorship and bring more democracy to solid foundation in every sphere of the society. Again, it will prove that the real motor of history is people power in streets and square, not institutional politics.

Social movements and candle protest

Social movements in Korea made huge contributions to democratisation and social justice. But after ups and downs, as well as constant repression by regimes, two pillars of historical social movements, that is, student movement and trade union movement, lost their strength.

Of course, in the course of democratisation, social movements expanded its area in society and advocated many of progressive reforms. However, the historic effort to build a progressive political party failed, though Progressive Justice Party (PJP) survived as a minor party in the parliament. The United Progressive Party (UPP) was dissolved in 2014 under Park's government's outrageous attack and its own political mistakes.

The candle light vigils are a comparatively new phenomenon that began as a means to protest in 2002, when two middle school girls were trampled down to death by a U.S. military tank. The 2002 candle protests was one of key mass movements in anti-US, anti-imperialist struggle.

In 2008, as soon as Lee MB government inaugurated, young school girls began protest against the new government's decision to import the US beef without proper supervision. The 2008 candles were different from the previous one, in that the protesters mobilised based on online community, a virtual square where discussion and debates proliferated.

The candle light protests showed a unique dynamics which was never shown before. All different group, mostly organised at web communities, from young student to housewives, joined candle light vigils and marches. The newly emerging protesters were free from old rules, and freer, more expressive, more diverse and more imaginative. Around free and diverse environment, more militant action groups emerged and led militant street battles against police brutalities.

The 2008 candle light protest waged a 4-month-long struggle almost every night. And its climax was one million rally on June 10th, anniversary of 1987 Uprising. On August 15, the last big rally was held, but thereafter, under severe suppression, the candle protest dwindled as a movement.

However, the 2008 candle protests raised issue of democracy under the slogan of the Constitution Clause 1: The R.O.K. is a democratic republic and its power comes from people. Starting from beef issue, the protest challenged the authoritarianism of Lee's conservative government.

Compared with 2008, the 2016 protest expanded its mass base, and the scale of mass mobilisation became even larger beyond comparison, though the intensity of struggle or radicalisation is rather low. Thus, with its determination and enormous scale of mobilisation, the 2016 candle protest could win a decisive victory over the whole establishment, unlike the 2008 protest's eventual defeat.

In 2008, the social movement and trade unions were perplexed with the emergence of a new, different type of protests and movements. In contrast, in 2016, they are not in conflict with rank and file candle carriers. This is one of essential strength of candle protest, defeating divisive maneuvering and ideological attacks.

Formally, the weekend mega rallies are led by a newly formed coalition, Emergency People's Action, of 1,500 civil society organisations. However, the spontaneity overwhelms the organised sectors. For instance, on November 30th, KCTU organised a general strike in which 200,000 workers joined, and held 100,000 strong rallies and march nationwide. Usually, this was a huge mobilisation, but in the context of candle protest, organised labor's intervention had relatively small impact.

The 2016 candle protest is too big to control. No group or forces cannot control or dominate. In some aspect, it is a perfect example of collective intellect.

Beyond the impeachment

The turning point was the mega-protest on December 3rd. Before it the conservative media prevailed and wielded ideological hegemony. Media agitated protest and applauded its decency of avoiding the violent confrontational approach of old social movements. After Park's speech on November 29, conservative media preferred a compromise, that is, not impeachment, but orderly retreat, in which rival factions within the ruling party united.

However, millions of candles demanded her immediate resignation, refusing any compromise, thus making the parliamentary impeachment the only path to a solution, as long as Park refuses to step down. As the opposition parties are united and joined by non-Park faction of the ruling party, the way to impeachment was cleared.

And Park was said to have given up another manoeuvre to defend herself and chose to wait for the impeachment, still with a slim hope for the impeachment being voted down. For now the pressure is headed on the pro-Park faction MPs who are trapped between Park and his or her own electorates. Voting for impeachment is a punishment of the president, and a self-punishment of their own party. Otherwise, voting against impeachment means no future career as a politician, as well as triggering

an even larger protest against the regime as a whole, or apocalyptic catastrophe.

Eventually, ever-growing candle grassroots have prevailed the situation, over media hegemony and institutional party politics. A long road to democracy was paved by the power of multi-million mega-protests.

South Koreans were given right to vote under U.S. military government. Historically, they had no Chartist or Suffragette movement. However, in 1987, they fought the right to elect a leader directly, and now in 2016, they exercise a right to recall the wrongly chosen leader. Technically, the ouster of Park from power is the impeachment by the parliament, but actually it is the recall from the people power!

The 2016 candle uprising has won a tremendous historical victory and the democracy will be even stronger and more extensive. However, the people power of candle protests must go beyond the impeachment. It is time to start a imaginative experiment of revolutionising the potential of people power! Maybe candles might blow out, but it can rekindle at any proper moment! In that sense, candles won't die out!

Youngsu Won

International Forum in Korea

IFiK - Dec. 9, 2016
