Korea Journal, vol. 61, no. 4 (winter 2021): 5–19.
doi: 10.25024/kj.2021.61.4.5

On This Topic

The Paradox of the Social Movement Society

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Political protests and social movements have always played a significant role in shaping the fabric of Korean politics and society. The power of social movements in shaping social discourse, political agendas, and electoral outcomes cannot be overstated. From the April Revolution in 1960 to the June pro-democracy mobilization in 1987, there is no shortage of narratives about mass protests that changed the course of Korean society in school textbooks, in a broad range of cultural productions, and in the collective memory of Koreans. Political participation via protests and social movements did not abate with democratization. On the contrary, the levels of participation and disruptive potential only increased, which led a reporter for a foreign press in 2008 to declare that "protesting [has] become part of the culture since they successfully ousted the dictatorship in 1987."[1] The massive candlelight protests of 2016–2017 that led to the impeachment of then president Park Geun-hye can certainly be understood as a manifestation of this trait.

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1. "South Korea's Culture of Protest," *Al Jazeera*, June 14, 2008. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p3QIuH4FwbY (accessed November 22, 2021).

Until recently the continuation of social movement politics long into post-authoritarian Korea has raised some eyebrows among researchers. Many political scientists interpreted the frequency and intensity of protests as a sign of democratic weakness. Some placed blame on activists that refused to give up their political radicalism (S. Kim 1997; Im 2000). Others saw the failure of the party system to properly articulate, aggregate, and represent social interests as the main cause of the powerful influence of social movements as they substituted for political parties (Choi 2000; 2012; S. Kim 2009; Lee 2009). Common in these accounts was a view that somehow social movements and institutionalized politics are mutually exclusive. But looking around the world, we see social movements everywhere. Social movements challenge existing political establishments, but they do so by operating under the constraints imposed by the given institutional structures. At times, social protests may appear highly disruptive, even violent, but eventually they dissolve into the banality of institutional politics as temporary solutions are made along the way. In this sense, Korea is far from an anomaly.

The concept of a *social movement society* accentuates the nature of modern societies in which social protests have become a perpetual element (Meyer and Tarrow 1997). In today's world, social movements occur with greater frequency, involve more diverse constituencies, and represent a wider range of claims. The social movement society is in part a product of social movement institutionalization, "the creation of a repeatable process that is essentially self-sustaining," wherein "all the relevant actors can resort to well-established and familiar routines" (Meyer and Tarrow 1997, 21). Institutionalization facilitates greater reliance on the electoral process, routine negotiations, and working through government institutions, which encourages a shift toward more standardized, less disruptive forms of collective action. This also pushes professionalization and bureaucratization among social movement organizations. Even for the most radical social groups, it becomes increasingly difficult to bypass institutions and political parties (McAdam et al 2001; Goldstone 2003; Meyer 2007; Tarrow 2021). This interweaving of social movements and institutional politics is in turn what allows social movements to thrive in

the social movement society.

Korean scholarship has made similar observations, demonstrating how changes in the economy, relations between the government and political challengers, and relations among political challengers have led to the expansion and diversification of the social movement field (Shin and Chang 2011; S. Kim 2016). However, how these changes reshaped social movements, in what direction, and to what effect are some questions that have been left unanswered. The five papers presented in this special issue can be seen as attempts to dig deeper into these questions. The examination of the labor movement by Yoonkyung Lee, the feminist movement in recent years by Jinsook Kim, LGBTQI+ activism by Yeong Ran Kim, the Protestant Right movement by Myung-Sahm Suh, and the environmental movement by Sun-Chul Kim not only introduces us to some of the most contentious issues defining Korea today, but also sheds light on the complex dynamics by which social movements unfold as well as the new challenges they face in the changing landscapes of the social movement society of Korea.

How Social Movements Change

Social movements are products of their times; they are never a fixed entity. One of the strong points of the papers in this issue concerns their focus on the temporal dimensions that expose the changing dynamics of social movements. Each contribution follows the trajectory of social movements and highlights how changes in the broader context have constrained and/or opened new spaces. In the process, they highlight key junctures that forced major changes in the social movements under scrutiny as those junctures altered the threat/opportunity perceptions among involved parties (Goldstone and Tilly 2001). In Yoonkyung Lee's study of the labor movement in the new millennium, it was the financial crisis of 1997–1998 and the subsequent spread of neoliberal policies that led to the bifurcation of the labor force into regular and non-regular workers, the latter of which was increasingly subject to heightened levels of precarity, insecurity, and

stratification in the labor market as they lost their bargaining leverage, associational power, and legal protection for collective action. Lee presents the new forms of organizing and tactics by non-regular workers as a creative, if desperate, response to the adverse conditions they are subject to.

Jinsook Kim explores the resurgence of feminist activism, commonly referred to as *feminism reboot* within feminist circles in Korea, that has gained momentum recently. To Kim, the resurgence was aided by the widespread use of digital media, which became a vehicle for women to share their feminist identity and disseminate their cause. This feminist weaponization of digital media did not happen in a vacuum but was in large part a response to intense levels of misogyny and violence directed toward young women, the notorious far-right online community *Ilbe* and the Gangnam Station murder offering prime examples. Faced with new challenges, young feminists diverged from the institutionalized channels and tactics on which the earlier feminist generations had relied and instead sought grassroots processes afforded by digital media space.

Yeong Ran Kim introduces readers to seven seemingly discrete scenes to examine the strategies and tactics of queer activism over time. In the earlier periods, queer activists sought solidarity action to express their identity and mark their place within the broader social movement field. By the 2010s, they were becoming more vocal in their identity claims and more active in staging their independent action. The major event that accelerated the change was the anti-discrimination bill introduced for legislation in 2007, although it failed to even be reviewed in the legislature due to the organized backlash of the conservative Protestant community. Nonetheless, Kim sees the ongoing effort of queer activists to find safe, independent political spaces, and to enlarge these spaces by building intersectional solidarity, as a meaningful attempt at creating "a world within the world."

From an ideological standpoint, some may find Myung-Sahm Suh's inquiry of the Protestant Right as an awkward fit in our collection. However, the key mechanisms that led to the creation of what Suh describes as "anti-liberal-American evangelicalism, based on the ideology

of hetero-nationalism" share considerable commonalities with other social movements tackling progressive causes. To Suh, the Protestant Right first took shape in response to the rising tide of anti-Americanism manifested by the 2002 candlelight protests, which in turn was a response to the killing of two teenage schoolgirls by US Army vehicles, as well as the conservatives' perceived threat of changing ROK-US relations triggered by the Roh Moo-hyun administration's attempt at renegotiating SOFA (US-Korean Status of Forces Agreement) in 2003. However, Suh observes a shift, or expansion, in the frames of the Protestant Right as new threats appeared in the cultural realm represented by new issues concerning LGBTQ rights, feminism, and Islam. To the extent the feminist movement and queer activism were galvanized by the conservative backlash, as Jinsook Kim and Yeong Ran Kim relate, we can see the surge of the Protestant Right was in part brought about in reaction to the activisms of feminists and queers. This way, opposing social movements often constitute each other in the social movement society.

Sun-Chul Kim's paper traces the changes the environmental movement has undergone, with special attention to the changing degrees of social movement autonomy. At first, environmental groups set out as a formidable independent political force making radical demands against the state and chaebols as the culprits of environmental harm in the early 1990s. Over time, however, their political autonomy eroded, and the environmental movement gradually became part of the status quo. Kim attributes this change to the rapid expansion of a new model of collaborative state-civil society relations, namely, hyeopchi or "co-governance" as Kim puts it, that took place since the mid-2000s.

These analyses offer an excellent opportunity to study the aspects of change and continuity in social movements as they unfold over time. With a foundational cause and a set of core claims, central network, and movement legacy passed on from the past, the political identity of each social movement appears relatively stable. But changes in the broader environment create new constraints and opportunities that induce change in a movement's constituents and/or opponents, political and organizational strategies, and tactics. For the labor movement, change in

movement dynamics was caused by a turn toward a neoliberal economy that stratified and disempowered non-regular workers. Yoonkyung Lee also shows how the once militant regular workers can turn into defenders of the status quo, implying that political identities may even change. Similar change can be observed in the trajectory of the environmental movement as policies promoting collaboration between the government and civil society gradually coopted key environmental activists and diminished room for autonomous action. On the other hand, the feminist reboot, the mobilization of the LGBTQI+ community, and the rising tide of the Protestant Right were all aided in part by actions of external actors that heightened the perception of threat, while the anti-discrimination bill provided a new sense of purpose and opportunity for the minority communities. These analyses highlight the importance of transformative events as well as the central role contentious interaction, including backlashes and reactions to them, plays in (re)constituting the dynamics of social movements (McAdam and Sewell 2001).

The Complexity of Social Movements

Another point of strength in the special issue papers has to do with how they shed light on the complexities and nuances that are observed in any social movement. We often talk about a social movement, for example, the labor movement or the women's movement, as if each represents a coherent entity. As the papers suggest, this is not the case. For example, in Yoonkyung Lee's paper, we see the divergence of worker interests as the work force is divided into workers with relatively secure employment in the public sector and large firms and non-regular workers that lack the same kind of security and protection. Even within the non-regular category, workers are further classified into independent contractors, care workers, platform workers, etc., each endowed with a unique set of conditions and challenges. To talk about the labor movement without paying attention to these inner incongruities will only hamper full understanding of the labor movement as it exists.

The same goes for the feminist movement. Jinsook Kim's portrayal of the "ideological heterogeneity" behind the feminist resurgence of the mid-2010s offers a picture of young feminists rebelling against their predecessors who had already become part of the political establishment, only to be challenged by a newly rising tide of a transphobic radical feminism (*raetpem*) insisting on the biological women-ness as the marker of feminism. Kim further shows another internal fissure that took place within raetpems during the 2016–2017 candlelight protest between those who called for Park Geun-hye's resignation and those who saw the calls for impeachment as evidence for misogyny. Sun-Chul Kim's paper on the environmental movement suggests a similar rupture as those fed up with the mainstream strategy of "working within the system" pushed forward with a non-compromising alternative path.

It is important to note that these divisions often lead to the hierarchical reorganization of groups within a social movement. This is no accident since social movement institutionalization involves "a kind of channeling, some factions in, and some factions out" (Meyer 2007, 132). Sometimes, it is the timing of workforce entrance or a group's participation in a social movement that makes the difference. Institutionalization takes place in a way that accommodates the interests of early risers. While the early risers may gain a degree of access to power, latecomers are often left out. The domination of the national trade union federations by regular workers in large firms reflects their early struggle for job security and higher wages. The early generation of feminists and environmentalists are now in positions of power and influence. They may pride themselves on the gains they made, but there will always be a new generation of activists that see them as part of the problem rather than the solution. This is one reason why we need to be more attentive to the nuances within social movements and to be more mindful that using blanket terms to describe complex social movement processes may obscure more than it exposes.

In a similar vein, we can question the generic "progressive vs. conservative" or "left vs. right" binaries frequently taken for granted among observers and researchers alike. It is telling that the social movements analyzed in this issue emerged or underwent major changes

in the late 1990s into the mid-2000s, a period of the successive liberal administrations of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun that, at least on paper, expanded civil and political rights. It was also a period of unrelenting neoliberal policies that exacerbated social inequality on many fronts, resulting in greater levels of polarization, contention, and instability (Y. Kim 2018). The coexistence of these two seemingly incompatible trends further complicates things. On the one hand, we see how the newly expanded political space incentivized new voices to form and enter public politics (e.g., the queer community and the Protestant Right) or facilitated existing voices to partake in government channels that would, in theory, enhance their voices in the policy-making process (e.g., the environmental movement and segments of the feminist movement). On the other hand, neoliberal reforms carried out during this period gave the upper hand to business interests, privatized a good part of public services, and created a byzantine system of rules and classifications that made it more difficult for grassroots challengers to organize, build horizontal ties, and effect meaningful change. At the same time, misogyny and discrimination did not abate under the liberal administrations. Nor did the liberal administrations make visible efforts to address the issues.

Given this context, it is far from surprising that labor, feminist, queer, and environmental activists, conventionally considered to be progressive, do not portray conservatives as their opponents. Rather, their fight is set against a broader system of oppression, irresponsibility, exclusion, and discrimination, characteristics shared by both the liberal and conservative political establishments. In this light, this binary framework could be seen as a likely vestige of the pro-democracy struggle of the past, cemented as hegemonic narrative by the 1980s' young activists that are now in positions of power. This is not to deny any sense of affinity between these activist communities and the liberal political establishment, or vice versa. But collective identity in social movements, the construction of boundaries that define who *we* are and who *they* are, are reflections of social relations that are in a constant flux (Tilly [2005] 2015). Hence it would be remiss to define the 2016–2017 candlelight protests as if they were a political challenge by an alliance of liberal forces against the conservative

establishment. For such understanding not only sweeps under the rug the substantial differences within the so-called liberal camp, it also obscures the fact that conservatives made up a good part of the participants throughout the months of protest. Again, the identity of social movements is never fixed; Assuming so may obscure more than it reveals.

Post-democracy and the Future of Social Movements in Korea

Social movements are not just complex phenomena, they are also paradoxical in many ways. Social movements symbolize the spirit of emancipation and have functioned as a motor of change throughout modern history. Yet we often see successful social movements of the past creating new power structures and new systems of exclusion even as they move society forward. Today, success has become more elusive as the emancipatory spirit that propels social movements are tempered with an endless set of formal rules and the dominant cultures of contemporary democracies. This climate easily relegates idealism to the cold calculation of political negotiation and compromise. At the same time, every issue seems to be giving birth to social movements with the advent of the social movement society. At a time when social movements become ubiquitous, one comes to wonder if the social movement remains an effective tool for positive change.

We see a similar development with democracy. Democracy today is taken for granted to such an extent most people do not even care whether democratic institutions are working properly or if their rights are regressing. In the meantime, everyone, including authoritarians, market fundamentalists, misogynists, racists, and even fascistic groups, justify their ideas and actions in the name of democracy. No wonder democracy is backsliding on a global scale (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018; Brown 2020). This state of democracy is properly captured in the concept of post-democracy, a state of democratic deterioration despite having all the democratic institutions in place. In a post-democracy, writes Colin Crouch (2020, 4), "we do not notice that democracy has weakened, because its

institutions and habits remain; but the real energy of the political system has passed into the hands of small elites of politicians and the corporate rich, who increasingly ensure that politics responds to their wishes." It is a state in which most people blindly assume they live in a democracy, an assumption that contributes to democratic decline.

Looking into the current state of the social movements examined in this issue attests to the baffling state of democracy and social movements in the Korean context. After successfully organizing for a legislative petition for a labor law revision that would allow more workers to enjoy labor rights in late 2020, labor saw a setback when the ruling Democratic Party proposed a rival bill that was so full of loopholes it prevented millions of workers from access to labor rights.[2] While workers without legal protection continue to die,[3] workers' collective action is met with severe government repression. In September, the government arrested the head of the trade union federation,[4] KCTU, and cordoned off labor martyr Chun Tae-il's statue from public access ahead of the 51st anniversary of Chun's death in November.[5] Life for women in Korea did not get much better either. Under COVID conditions, women lost jobs at more than twice the rate of men (Jones 2021). News of violence against and even murder of women continue to flood the news cycle to the extent the

2. "Unions All Over S. Korea to Demonstrate Against 'Regressive' Labor Reforms," *Korea Herald*, November 13, 2020. http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20201113000718 (accessed November 26, 2021).
3. "Deaths From Industrial Disasters," *Korea Times*, February 14, 2021. http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2021/02/137_303990.html (accessed November 26, 2021); "Delivery Workers in South Korea Say They're Dying of 'Overwork,'" *New York Times*, January 13, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/world/asia/korea-couriers-dead-overwork.html (accessed November 26, 2021).
4. "Police Arrest Labor Umbrella Organization Head Over Holding Rallies Despite COVID-19 Ban," *Yonhap News*, September 2, 2021. https://en.yna.co.kr/view/AEN20210902000551325 (accessed November 26, 2021).
5. "Gyeongchal-e dulleossain Jeon Taeil dongsang" (Chun Tae-il's Statue Surrounded by Police), *OhMyNews*, November 12, 2021. http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/OhmyPhoto/annual/2021_at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0002787123 (accessed November 26, 2021).

president was forced to publicly address the issue.[6] High-profile politicians and presidential candidates, including the supposedly liberal candidate representing the Democratic Party, continue to make misogynistic remarks in public without many qualms.[7] The frustration of environmental activists has been building as well. The government failed to meet the minimum recommendations of the international community concerning Korea's greenhouse gas reduction in large part because the government's climate policies are driven more by the desire to support major chaebols and spur growth than to address climate change.[8] Despite the pledge to reach carbon neutrality by 2050, the government is pushing forward with the construction of coal power plants and airports that would undercut its decarbonization pledge and destroy the environment and ecosystems, including mudflats and land and marine life.[9]

But nothing demonstrates the deadlock of social movement in the current state of (post-)democracy more dramatically than the issue of (anti-)discrimination. After eleven futile attempts at introducing an anti-discrimination bill to the National Assembly since 2007, a coalition of queer, human rights, labor, and other civil society groups submitted an anti-discrimination bill through a legislative petition process backed by more than a hundred thousand signatures. Instead of reviewing the proposal, the National Assembly, in which the liberal Democratic

6. "Moon Says Violence Against Women Must be Prevented," *Korea Herald*, November 25, 2021. http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20211125000189 (accessed November 26, 2021).
7. "South Korean Presidential Hopefuls Push Anti-feminist Agenda," *Nikkei Asia*, November 24, 2021. https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/South-Korea-election/South-Korean-presidential-hopefuls-push-anti-feminist-agenda (accessed November 26, 2021).
8. "Gihuakdangim-eul jainhan 2030 gamchungmokpyo-wa 2050 sinario-reul jeonmyeon jaesurip-hara" (Acknowledge the Government is a Climate Villain and Re-establish the 2030 Reduction Target and the 2050 Scenario in Full), Climate Crisis Emergency Action, October 18, 2020. http://climate-strike.kr/4037/ (accessed November 26, 2021).
9. "S. Korean Government Continues Investing in Overseas Coal Project," *News Tapa*, July 13, 2021. http://newstapa.org/article/Xi1j- (accessed November 26, 2021); "Je 6cha gonghang gaebal jonghap gyehoek pyegihara" (Abandon the Sixth Comprehensive Airport Development Plan), *Pressian*, September 30, 2021. https://www.pressian.com/pages/articles/2021092922090085078#0DKU (accessed November 26, 2021).

Party holds the majority, postponed the review deadline to May 2024, likely in fear of the Protestant Right's opposition during an election period.[10] In fact, the Protestant Right has been doing everything it can to oppose the passage of the bill and is now renewing its campaign by posting hate-spewing ads on digital billboards centered on the message that homosexuality can be cured. The ROK constitution prohibits discrimination, and the international human rights community is unequivocal on the principle of anti-discrimination that provides basic protection from discrimination for all members of society.[11] Yet the best the Democratic Party could do was to organize a public event to debate the pros and cons of the bill, as if it were a matter of opinion. As the Democratic Party played the role of *objective host*, individuals known to have instigated hate were given a parliamentary platform to defend their bigotry to the infuriation of supporters of basic human rights.[12]

These instances present us with some of the profound challenges in the context of post-democracy. Democracy is seen less as a value and goal in and of itself and more as a game rule, a device to settle contending views, regardless of their content. As a result, democratic institutions are there but the current climate is increasingly allowing them to be used as a platform to advance anti-democratic claims and values. Political parties are less interested in competing over political platforms that represent their values than they are in turning into timid chasers of votes. Consequently, citizens are treated less as active bearers of rights and more

10. "The Commanding Dissent of Churches," Korea Economic Institute, July 2, 2021. https://keia.org/the-peninsula/the-commanding-dissent-of-churches/ (accessed November 26, 2021).
11. "National Assembly Should Act Swiftly to Enact Anti-discrimination Legislation," International Federation For Human Rights, November 11, 2021. https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/south-korea/national-assembly-should-act-swiftly-to-enact-anti-discrimination (accessed November 26, 2021).
12. "Deobureo minjudang-eun hyeomo dongjo-reul meomchugo chabyeol geumjibeop jejeong gyehoek-eul balkyeora" (Democratic Party Should Stop Sympathizing with Hate and Announce Plan to Enact Anti-discrimination Bill), Chabyeol geumjibeop jejeong yeondae (Anti-discrimination Bill Alliance), November 26, 2021. https://equalityact.kr/1126-2/ (accessed November 26, 2021).

as passive customers in the political marketplace. In contrast, experts and technocrats are given unprecedented levels of power that allow them to make decisions and build labyrinthine systems that are often unfathomable to others. In this Kafkaesque reality of post-democracy, social movements may thrive, ostensibly, but increasingly it is without the creative and imaginative power that once gave them their name. The more social movements are about everything, the more likelier they accomplish nothing.

Too often studies of social movements, democracy, or political change have been conducted without taking into full consideration the deeper conditions that underlie their appearances. Perhaps it is time we paused and reflected on these substantive aspects, for only then will we be able to find the true meaning of human activities that we purport to understand. The papers in this special issue may not provide full answers, but they can certainly be used as an opportunity to delve deeper into the fundamental questions concerning the past, present, and future of social movements, democracy, and Korean society.

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Received: 2021.11.28. Revised: 2021.12.01. Accepted: 2021.12.01.