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Articulating Inequality in the Candlelight Protests of 2016–2017

Yoonkyung LEE

Abstract

This study examines the eruption and growth of the candlelight rallies that resulted in such a dramatic but peaceful regime change in South Korea during 2016–2017 by focusing on the construction of a political reform agenda. While the rigged and dysfunctional administration led by President Park Geun-hye was undeniably the immediate cause of the massive uprising, this paper suggests that there were two underlying processes that transformed citizen reaction to the eccentric corruption scandal into a broad and fundamental critique of Korean society. Before the eruption of the popular protest, civil society has been actively problematizing the soaring inequalities and a democratic reversal taking place during the reigns of successive conservative governments. Following the ignition of the candlelight rallies, the protests turned into a political arena where diverse imaginings about to-be-restored-democracy were articulated and where addressing socioeconomic inequalities was part of the political reform agenda. Informed by a social movement approach that highlights the interactive process of meaning-construction by movement actors, this paper maintains that it is crucial to uncover the processes through which civil society and political elites articulate issues of inequality to turn them into a central public discourse and a democratic agenda.

Keywords: candlelight protest, inequality, political articulation, framing, civil society, movement infrastructure, presidential impeachment, economic democratization, *jeokpye*, inequality and protest participation, *chaebol*

Yoonkyung LEE is Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Toronto. E-mail: yoonkyung.lee@utoronto.ca

Millions of ordinary citizens with candles in their hands, a new symbol of peaceful disobedience and resistance in South Korea, dislodged their country's corrupt president and installed a new government in the spring of 2017. Animated by fury over the unprecedented political irregularities committed by then President Park Geun-hye and her confidante, Choi Soon-sil, a popular uprising began in October 2016. The ensuing Candlelight Protests[1] continued every Saturday for almost six months in the nation's major cities, most visibly in Seoul's Gwanghwamun Square, and even in Korean communities worldwide. The protest drew a total of 17 million participants and the exceptional scale and tenacity of this nationwide mobilization compelled the South Korea's National Assembly to impeach Park in December 2016, with the country's Constitutional Court confirming the presidential impeachment in March 2017, thus clearing the way for prosecutors to arrest Park and her cronies on various criminal charges. In the snap election held in May 2017, Moon Jae-in of the Democratic Party (Deobureo minjudang) won the presidency with 41 percent of the popular vote. This was a political spectacle made by people power, putting an end to nine years of conservative rule under Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye that had seriously eroded the nation's hard-won democracy by the compromising of rule of law and repression of civil liberties and media freedom. In an era when examples of democratic decay, anti-systemic populism, corrosive nationalism, and even white supremacy are on the rise in different parts of the globe, South Korea's protest movement was the focus of such envious remarks as, "South Korea just showed the world how to do democracy."[2]

This study examines the eruption and growth of the candlelight rallies that resulted in such a dramatic but peaceful regime change in South Korea during 2016−2017 by focusing on the construction of a political reform agenda. While the rigged and dysfunctional administration led by Park was

1. When referring to the general act of protest using candles this term is not capitalized. When referring specifically to the Candlelight Protests of 2016−2017 that toppled the Park Geun-hye presidency, the term is capitalized.
2. Ishaan Tharoor, "South Korea just Showed the World how to Do Democracy", *Washington Post*, May 10, 2017.

undeniably the immediate cause of the massive uprising, this paper suggests that there were two underlying processes that transformed citizen reaction to the eccentric corruption scandal into a broad and fundamental critique of Korean society. Before the eruption of the popular protest, civil society has been actively problematizing soaring inequality and a democratic reversal taking place during the reigns of successive conservative governments. Following the ignition of the candlelight rallies that were initially prompted by the Park and Choi scandal, the protest itself turned into a political arena where diverse imaginings about to-be-restored-democracy were articulated. As the Saturday protests persisted, movement actors and participants increasingly identified a multitude of socioeconomic inequalities as the political reform agenda to be addressed by the post-Park democracy in Korea. In other words, the contentious mobilization of ordinary citizens began as a collective action to remove a corrupt and incompetent president but grew to broaden the imagination of democratic politics around issues of socioeconomic disparities and unfairness.

In advancing this line of argument, this study engages with the scholarship that links economic duress to political consequences such as the rise of authoritarian leaders and xenophobic nationalism. The examination of the Korean case suggests that material hardship and growing disparities may lead to a different political outcome, depending on how inequality is politically articulated in a society. Informed by a social movement approach that highlights the interactive process of meaning construction by movement actors, this paper maintains that it is crucial to uncover the process through which civil society and political elites articulate issues of inequality to turn them into a central public discourse and democratic agenda.[3]

To discuss this subject in detail, the paper first examines studies that probe the relationship between rising inequality and political consequences, and suggests the theoretical importance of tracing the process and actors involved in the articulation of inequality issues. I proceed to discuss

3. This study understands "political articulation" as a process through which actors give a political meaning to a social grievance by framing it in a specific way, and it is used interchangeably with framing, meaning construction, and discourse-making.

various aspects of growing inequality in Korea in the last twenty-year span with descriptive socioeconomic data. In the third section, I identify civil society actors and progressive political forces that politically articulated socioeconomic inequality and uncover the processes through which objective indicators of inequality transformed into a public discourse and political agenda in the 2010s prior to the Candlelight Protests. Finally, I discuss how various aspects of disparity were represented during the Candlelight Protests as that popular mobilization extended over several months by analyzing the changing discourse and agenda on the protest scenes. I also report survey results that show how the public rated the centrality of inequality issues in their protest participation as well as in the reform agenda of the newly inaugurated government. The paper closes with a brief discussion on how the candlelight movement and its articulation of inequality highlights a new possibility of democratic politics in an era of material hardship and democratic reversals.

Theorizing the Relationship between Rising Inequality and Political Consequences

Economic inequality has become a buzzword characterizing many present-day societies after several decades of the neoliberal turn and the eruption of a number of economic crises of a global or regional magnitude. In reaction to heightened disparities and insecurity, people have mobilized in various modes demanding divergent political solutions. In the Occupy Movement, people protested with the prominent slogan of "1 percent versus 99 percent"; in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, and Venezuela, people brought to power political forces that advocated for a 21st-century socialism; and in countries such as Austria, Denmark, and the U.S.A., they voted for right-wing parties that represented various political stripes, such as populism, nationalism, or xenophobic neofascism.

Current scholarship examining soaring inequality and its political consequences has drawn divided conclusions. One school suggests that inequality is one of the causes of democratic decline and the rise of

authoritarian forces. Under deteriorating material circumstances, poor citizens lose interest in politics and participate less in the political process (Dahl 1971; Schattschneider 1975; Verba, et al. 1995). Dahl (1971, 102) particularly cautioned that a poor electorate "may not stimulate demands for greater equality but instead may turn into resignation, apathy, despair, and hopelessness." With declining political engagement by an impoverished citizenry, politics becomes increasingly a game of a small circle of political-economic elites who capture political institutions to design policies that suit their interests. In their study of American politics, Gilens and Page (2014) find that democratic institutions in the U.S.A. disproportionately respond to the preference of economic elites, while disregarding the interests of average citizens in the process of adopting public policies. Crouch (2004) coins such plutocratic tendencies "post-democracy"; Harvey (2005), "governance by experts and elites"; Hacker, and Pierson (2010), "winner-take-all politics"; and Bermeo (2016), "democratic backsliding."

Among the public, economic duress is further identified as giving rise to extreme ideas such as nationalist populism, a longing for authoritarian leadership, and religious fundamentalism as a way of addressing the woes of material degradation and insecurity (Harvey 2005). Especially for those on the losing side of the neoliberal global economy, anxieties grow and lead to a search for unwarranted blame and hypothetical threats. Many individuals who see the prospect of rising living standards as untenable under soaring material hardship put the blame on ethnic and racial others (Rauch 2017). Public anxieties are manifested in their declining support for democratic institutions as well as their increasing endorsement of autocratic leaders. The World Values Survey shows that the proportion of citizens who approve "having a strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections" has risen in the last twenty years in most countries included in the survey (Foa and Mounk 2017). The antidemocratic backslash reflected in survey findings is closely tied to anxieties brewed in the process of globalization over the last few decades. As a sizable group of the disenchanted electorate loses faith in democratic institutions, they become attracted to anti-systemic elites who foster illiberal politics (Foa and Mounk 2017, 9). This line of argument explains why white working-class voters

support right-wing conservatives like Donald Trump in the U.S.A. or Marine Le Pen in France, who advocate a politics of anti-immigration, racism, and nationalism.

Against such a gloomy assessment of the political consequences of growing material disparity, another school suggests that inequality prompts the mobilization of the poor and leads to economic voting and progressive politics. Classical social movement theories expect that structural grievances push the impoverished to mobilize to demand redress (Gurr 1970; Simmons 2014). Citizens affected by economic hardship bring their concerns to partisan competition as well. In reaction to economic disasters resulting from unwarranted neoliberalism and structural adjustment programs, Latin American voters supported leftist parties that promised redistributive politics. As a result, left-leaning presidents reigned in more than a dozen South American nations by the early 2010s (Weyland et al. 2010; Levitsky and Roberts 2011).[4] Yet, the responsiveness of political parties to issues of inequality may not be automatic. In their study of OECD countries, Pontusson and Rueda (2010) caution that although high levels of inequality have pushed leftist parties to move further to the left, such an effect was mediated only when poor voters were effectively mobilized.

In short, various empirical studies that seek to uncover the political consequences of heightened inequalities do not converge on a common conclusion. Whether economic hardship leads to greater support for progressive/redistributive politics or to authoritarian nationalism, it is important to recognize that it is not material duress per se that creates a unidirectional political outcome. One constructive way of engaging with this debate is to focus on the political articulation process. Structural inequities may be constant in diverse places but the collective perception of those conditions varies depending on how those conditions are politically articulated (McAdam 1982). The framing perspective in the social movement scholarship views "movements as signifying agents engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for protagonists, antagonists, and bystanders" (Snow 2004, 384) as they exercise their agency by selectively

4. There has been a reversal to this trend in recent elections in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

recognizing and locating social problems in their interaction with real social conditions (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). Therefore, it is important to trace how the existing economic difficulty is articulated by the political elite and how those affected by inequality mobilize to address the issues of material insecurity.

In this regard, South Korea shows a different mode of inequality articulation compared to a number of Western democracies where the far-right place the blame of their material adversity on "outsiders" and advocate anti-democratic, xenophobic methods to mobilize the segment of the population who has been placed on the losing side of neoliberal globalization. Economic duress in Korean politics has been a central issue raised by civil society and center-left forces, not the ultra conservatives who are driven by ideas of anti-communism, anti-North Korea, and "liberal democracy."[5] Civic groups and progressive political forces have publicized economic disparity to make it a major agenda item in the formal political process by approaching inequality as a domestic political problem exacerbated by a democratic reversal under conservative presidents that emboldened collusion between political elites and *chaebol*s. As exemplified in the discourse of "economic democratization," addressing economic disparity was articulated as a way of strengthening and deepening democracy in Korea. It was this public discourse of inequality and unfairness that was further accentuated during the contentious mobilization of Candlelight Protests that aimed at dislodging the responsible political circle around Park and Choi. A case study of South Korea's Candlelight Protests of 2016–2017 may not offer a full, systematic answer to the question of deteriorating material conditions and their political outcomes, but it highlights one causal path through which civil society transforms objective inequality into a public discourse of inequality to expand the horizon of democratic politics. In the following sections, I discuss the objective conditions of growing inequality in Korea in the last twenty years and how issues of economic disparity were translated into a significant public discourse prior to the Candlelight Protests.

5. The Korean far-right stand for liberal democracy as an antithesis to people's democracy, the motto of communist countries.

Growing Inequality in Korea

The Korean economy, once praised for its *rapid growth with equity* in the postwar decades, has now transformed into one with *low growth with high inequality*. Neoliberal globalization in Korea began in the early 1990s and accelerated under the center-left political leadership in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s. Following the typical neoliberal prescriptions, Korea's financial market was liberalized, trade barriers were lowered, public enterprises were privatized, and labor laws were amended to make the labor market more flexible. Material inequalities created in this period were not just about an income gap between the haves and have-nots but also about structured stratifications within economic sectors, the labor market, sexes, and age groups.

In terms of income disparity, various measures show that the distribution of wealth has become highly skewed toward the top. Table 1 puts together major indicators of economic inequality to depict the change over the last twenty years.[6] The top 20 percent of income earners, who made 4 times more than the bottom 20 percent in 1996, were making 5.5 times more than the bottom 20 percent by 2016. The wealth of the top 10 percent also rose, from holding 34.7 percent of the national income to 48.5 percent during the same period. Another study that uses income tax statistics, instead of household survey data used for the aforementioned indicators, finds that the income of the top 1 percent rose from 4.8 percent in 1996 to 7.5 percent in 2010 (Kim and Kim 2015). This period also experienced a shrinkage of the middle class and an increased number of individuals living under poverty.

6. The Gini index is not included because the data that covers all households dates back only to 2006. Prior to 2006, Korean Gini was biased to under-report the extent of income gaps by including only the income of urban employed households, while excluding one-person households and the self-employed.

Table 1. Korea's Inequality Indicators: 1996–2016

	1996	2006	2016
Quintile ratio	4	5.4	5.5
Top 10 wealth	34.7%	44%	48.5%
Top 1 wealth	4.8%	6.9%	7.5% (2010)[a]
Middle-class ratio	68.5%	55%	43.6%
Poverty rate	11.3%	14.3%	14.7%
Irregular workers	25.3%	35.5%	32.8%
Unemployment	2%	3.5%	3.7%
Youth unemployment	4.6%	7.9%	9.8%

Source: Statistics Korea (2016b).

Note: Figures are based on market income, which combines wages and income from business, property, and inheritance. Middle class is defined as those who make 50–150 percent of the median national income. Poverty is defined as those who make less than 50 percent of the median national income. Youth is defined as individuals between 15 and 29 years old.

[a] This figure is from Kim and Kim (2015), who use income tax statistics from the *Gukse tonggye yeonbo* (Statistical Yearbook of National Tax).

At the same time, Korea's labor market became highly fractured between the protected and the unprotected. Under growing flexibilization of the labor market, irregular workers increased and the divide between regular and irregular employment deepened. By the government's conservative measure, the ratio of irregular workers has risen about 7 percent in the last twenty years, as Table 1 shows. But by an alternative indicator that more accurately captures insecure employment, the number is higher, 43.6 percent as of 2016 (Kim 2016).[7] These precarious and insecure jobs are disproportionally concentrated in women, the young, and the elderly. The gap between regular and irregular employment is severe not only in terms of job security but more so in terms of wages and basic entitlements of labor and social protection. Irregular workers are paid on average 48.7 percent of

7. The government and labor activist groups have different definition for irregular workers. The former includes temporary, part-time and atypical workers, whereas the latter adds long-term temporary workes and seasonal workers to the government classification.

regular workers' wages and are hugely disadvantaged in terms of retirement payments, bonuses, overtime pay, paid holidays, national pension, national health insurance, national unemployment insurance, and even union membership (Kim 2016). Another insecure group in the labor market, and one that is not often recognized, is the large number of self-employed. Some 5.6 million self-employed workers made up 21 percent of the Korean labor force as of 2016, much higher than the OECD average of 16 percent (Statistics Korea 2016a). As the majority of the self-employed engage in low value-added economic activities, more than a half of small businesses start-ups go bankrupt within three years and the bottom 20 percent of the self-employed make an annual income of less than USD10,000, with an average household debt of USD100,000 (Statistics Korea 2016a).

Along with soaring economic polarization, upward social mobility has become less tenable for many Koreans. While 69 percent of individuals born between 1956 and 1965 (now in their '50s and '60s) were able to move upward from their parents' class, that percentage dropped to 58 percent for those born between 1987 and 1994 (now in their '20s and '30s) (Kye and Hwang 2016; Hwang 2017). At the same time, 42.3 percent of the younger generation experienced downward or no mobility compared, to 31.1 percent of the older generation (Kye and Hwang 2016; Hwang 2017). As the socioeconomic inequalities that Koreans experience are not limited to just income gaps, some scholars suggest a "multi-layered disparity" to describe the reinforcing effects of various aspects of divides in wealth, location of residence, education, health, social capital, and class mobility (Koo 2007; Cheon and Shin 2016).

To address growing inequality and insecurity, welfare programs and social spending gradually increased. It is ironic that the center-left governments of Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun adopted neoliberal policies on the one hand and expanded social protection programs on the other. Despite these policy interventions, the growth of social welfare remains insufficient to have any meaningful effect on curbing inequality. South Korea's social spending is a little over 10 percent of GDP, one of the lowest rates among OECD nations, which on average spend 22 percent of their GDP on social programs (OECD 2014). Korea's welfare system

is identified as minimalist or "developmentalist" because it relies on the financial contribution of the recipients and employment-based entitlement and relegates social welfare to large conglomerates or family obligations (Yang 2008). Due to the relatively small expenditure and limited coverage of social welfare, the correcting effect of social spending on economic disparity remains small.

This brief description of rising socioeconomic inequalities in Korea indicates that objective living conditions have deteriorated for many citizens. Yet, how these deteriorating material conditions were translated into a political discourse was contingent upon the work of civil society and political elites.

The Political Articulation of Inequality

In the last fifteen years, Korean civil society and progressive political forces, such as the Democratic Labor Party (Minju nodongdang; DLP) formed in 2000, played a crucial role in the discourse-making of inequality. Civic groups, progressive intellectuals, and labor organizations highlighted the severity of inequality and organized public pressure for the expansion of the welfare state (Lee 2016). Since the early 2000s, new terms such as *bijeonggyujik* (irregular workers) and *yanggeukhwa* (economic polarization) have been widely used to describe the unprecedented reality of economic disparity. At the same time, *bokji* (welfare) and *gyeongje minjuhwa* (economic democratization) have been publicized as essential elements for the "democratization" of Korean democracy (Choi 2002). These terms made frequent appearances in academic discussions, advocacy activities, and workers' collective action. Such claim representation by civic groups influenced two major political parties to campaign on social welfare and inequality reduction beginning in the 2010 local elections.

First, civil society has actively advocated the expansion of social welfare in the aftermath of the Asian Financial Crisis when Korean society began to experience rising unemployment, job insecurity, and economic disparity. The People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (Chamyeo yeondae; PSPD), one of the central civic organizations, was initially formed in 1994

for political reform, the promotion of civil liberties, and the eradication of corruption. But the organization soon began to actively promote the expansion of social welfare by holding conferences and publishing *Welfare Trends* (*Bokji donghyang*), a monthly magazine issued since 1999, through which various policy alternatives were proposed and discussed (PSPD 2014). The PSPD's policy proposals were often adopted by the Kim Dae-jung government, as exemplified by the revised National Healthcare Act and the revised National Pension Act that universalized healthcare and pension and by the introduction of the National Basic Living Security Act in 1999, which provided the basic social safety net for the most economically vulnerable population (Wong 2004; Lee 2016).

Second, labor organizations such as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (Jeonguk minju nodong johap chongyeonmaeng; KCTU) identified the increasing number of irregular workers as a serious problem of disparity in the labor market and set up a special task force for "the strategic organization of irregular workers" in 2005 (Kim 2012).[8] Worker protests also raised issues of the insecurity and inequity they experienced in the workplace as Korean firms frequently practiced massive layoffs, factory closures, and (unlawful) extension of irregular employment in the post-1998 decades. Protests at Kiryung Electronics (irregular workers), KTX (subcontracted women train attendants), Hanjin Heavy Industry (massive layoffs), Ssangyong Automobile (massive layoffs), and Hyundai Automobile (irregular workers) are just a few examples of worker resistance that galvanized the seriousness of precarious employment and economic insecurity (Lee 2015). Labor unions and civic groups pressured the government to introduce laws to halt the rise of precarious labor which resulted in the introduction of the Irregular Workers Protection Act in 2007, which placed a two-year limit to the employment of irregular workers.[9]

8. The KCTU raised about USD2 million and assigned hundreds of activists to the task of organizing irregular workers.
9. The Irregular Workers Protection Act is a customary term that refers to the Fixed-term and Part-time Employees Protection Act and the Dispatch Workers Protection Act.

Third, civil society's attention to socioeconomic inequality and various protests organized by workers influenced political parties to redefine political cleavages in partisan competition. Electoral politics in Korea has traditionally been dominated by a regional cleavage while the electoral mobilization of the left has been stunted. An important condition that changed Korean party politics was the aforementioned formation of the DLP in 2000 based on the organizational support of various grassroots groups, most notably the KCTU and the Korean Peasants' League (Jeonguk nongminhoe chongyeonmaeng).[10] As the DLP entered the National Assembly with ten elected seats in 2004, the presence of an outright labor party advocating for labor rights and redistributive policies in the national legislature signaled the electoral possibility for a progressive agenda as well as programmatic competition centered on social welfare. From the outset, the DLP advocated for the protection of workers' rights, the expansion of social welfare, and the reduction of *chaebol* dominance in the Korean economy (Jeon 2007). Although the labor party was rarely able to pass its proposed bills due to its minority status in the legislature of 299 seats, the DLP proposed laws to restrict irregular employment, to make childcare and education affordable through public funds, to raise taxes on corporations, inheritance, and real estate ownership, and to introduce a net wealth tax (Jeon 2007).

With the formal presence of a labor party in the National Assembly and the increasing advocacy work by civil society on economic polarization to define the current political debate, political parties were pressured to be responsive to social protection policies. The traditionally center-positioned Democratic United Party (Minju tonghapdang, DUP)—later renamed the Democratic Party—moved to the left as a response to growing grievances over economic polarization. At its party caucus in October 2010, the DUP adopted "universal social protection" in its platform, set up special commissions for economic democratization (July 2011), *chaebol* reform (January 2012), and the protection of the economically exploited (Euljiro wiwonhoe) in May 2013

10. The DLP was renamed the Unified Progressive Party (Tonghap jinbodang; UPP) in 2011 but was dissolved by a ruling of the Constitutional Court in 2014. It is currently survived by the Justice Party (Jeonguidang) with five seats, which split from the UPP in 2012.

(Kang 2013). In reaction to the programmatic reorientation of the DUP, even the conservative Saenuri Party (later renamed the Liberty Korea Party [Jayu hangukdang]) came to advocate "selective social welfare" and the gradual expansion of redistributive programs. The changing language of electoral contestation from regionalism to social protection has been evident since the 2010 local elections when *bokji* stood as the central campaign issue (Jeong 2011). The key social policy agenda around which candidates competed in the 2010 local elections included free school meals, free childcare, public subsidies for college tuition, and welfare for the elderly. The center-left coalition won various positions in local competitions, demonstrating voter demands for the expanded application of social welfare programs.

In the national legislative election in April 2012 and the presidential election in December 2012, "*gyeongje minjuhwa*" was one of the central themes that defined the electoral contestation of competing candidates. The notion of economic democratization was based on Article 119-2 in the Korean Constitution that highlights the necessity of state intervention to maintain balance in the market and to "democratize the economy."[11] Referencing the constitutional clause on redistribution, civic groups and opposition parties emphasized that Korea's democratization was incomplete without an equitable economy. This is a unique way of framing the methods of addressing economic inequality because it ties economic equity to a crucial responsibility of a democratic government. With growing political discourse on social welfare, even the Saenuri Party's presidential candidate, Park Geun-hye, campaigned on economic democracy in 2012. The conservatives' pivot to redistribution policies was effective as Park won the support of voters affected by economic hardship, particularly the elderly.[12] Therefore, the salient policy issue that was

11. Article 119-2 was newly inserted in the 1987 constitutional amendment. It stipulates, "The State may regulate and coordinate economic affairs in order to maintain the balanced growth and stability of the national economy, to ensure proper distribution of income, to prevent the domination of the market and the abuse of economic power, and to democratize the economy through harmony among the economic agents."
12. Poverty in Korea is concentrated among the elderly: 49.3 percent of Korea's senior citizens are poor, which is the highest poverty rate for the over-65 age group among OECD nations, with the average elderly poverty rate being 12.6 percent (OECD 2016).

first raised by the DLP spilled over to the centrist party (the Democratic Party) and eventually the conservative party (the Liberty Korea Party).[13]

What is distinctive in the framing of inequality in Korea is that it targets domestic actors such as large corporations (*chaebol*) and their collusive relationships with the political powerful for the cause of unfairly concentrated wealth (Cheong and Cheon 2017).[14] As such, the proposed solution to inequality is to expand social welfare and to reform the *chaebol* structure to lessen economic concentration on the few. Also, addressing economic welfare is articulated as a project of deepening Korean democracy as the term "economic democratization" inscribed in the Korean Constitution began to be widely cited in the 2000s.

As framing processes are embedded in and bounded by aspects of the broader culture and political context (Snow 2004), the way in which growing inequality was politically articulated developed out of Korea's specific growth experience. Korean *chaebol*s that were nurtured during the fast developing decades were able to amass enormous economic power and political influence during the more recent decades of neoliberal shift. The asset value of the top fifty *chaebol*s, which accounted for 52.2 percent of Korea's GDP in 2000, increased to 84.4 percent by 2012 (Wi 2014). The disproportional market dominance of large conglomerates is perceived to be responsible for economic disparity and unfairness as well as to have been achieved through illegal means. Anecdotal suspicion about *chaebol*s' pursuit of political influence was verified in 2007 when Kim Yong-cheol, a corporate lawyer for Samsung, whistle-blew about the slush fund he managed and delivered to prosecutors and other political elites to buy political favors for the expansion of Samsung.

Although it was the center-left governments under Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun that adopted neoliberal policies and contributed to rising

13. Recent studies show that class voting is emergent in election results in the 2000s, albeit in a limited scope compared to the effect of age and region in vote choice (Cheon and Shin 2014; Lee and You, forthcoming).

14. Civic groups and critical intellectuals have consistently argued that the primary beneficiary of economic liberalization has been *chaebol* corporations, further contributing to disparities in income and assets.

disparity, the conservatives' return to power in 2008 was identified as the moment when economic circumstances became exacerbated, with the interests of conglomerates being unabashedly privileged. When Lee Myung-bak, a former CEO of Hyundai Construction, assumed the presidency (2008–2012), he pursued unapologetic business-friendly policies and introduced various relaxations in areas of *chaebol* regulation (such as the relaxation of the total amount of cross-shareholding, the relaxation of the total investment amount ceiling system, and the relaxation of corporate ownership of financial entities and mass media) and tax rates (such as the reduction of corporate tax and income tax) (Lee 2012). The Park Geun-hye administration (2013–2017) promoted more deregulation and quantitative easing while betraying her campaign promises on economic democracy.

The collusive relationship between *chaebol*s and the political elite was most evidently revealed in the Park-Choi scandal in 2016–2017. Not only did Samsung pay billions of won to buy a horse for Choi Soon-sil's daughter, an equestrian competitor, but further, "donated" 80 billion won (USD70 million) along with other *chaebol* corporations to two suspicious foundations that Ms. Choi created to offer an institutional asylum for President Park after retirement. In exchange, *chaebol*s were guaranteed with policy concessions or a pass for their unlawful activities.[15] This revelation was emblematic of a broader concern that the political system was rigged to serve the interests of powerful capital. Given the economic structure that privileges a small number of conglomerates, lessening the economic concentration on a few *chaebol* and restoring market fairness were important methods in addressing inequality in Korea.

Public discourse on economic disparity and unfairness in opportunities became even more prevalent during the rule of conservative administrations. This was because the collusive relationship between elected officials and *chaebol*s was emboldened, enabling them to pursue their entrenched privileges, violate fair process, and create ossified social hierarchies. More recent neologisms like *hell Joseon* (hell-like Korea), *gapjil* (the bossy attitude

15. *Kukmin ilbo*, last modified November 6, 2016, http://news.kmib.co.kr/article/view.asp?arcid=0923638505&code=11151100&sid1=all.

of someone with higher powers in work relations) and "the spoon theory of class" represent public sentiments about the rigidity of inequality and the extent of unfairness in Korean society. These terms first appeared and were widely used in online communities in the 2010s, with a growing number of incidents manifesting various aspects of social inequalities.[16]

First, *hell Joseon* weds hell and the despotic and rigidly stratified dynasty of Joseon (1392–1910) to denote the acute frustrations many Koreans experience today, resembling the unbreakable social hierarchies of the Joseon dynasty of centuries ago. The term began to appear in online discussions in 2010 and its usage exploded in social media in 2015.[17] *Gapjil* represents a highly hierarchical and abusive relationship that lies among economic actors. The term earned public visibility with Namyang Dairy Products' coercive practices with its authorized dealers in 2013 and the "nut return" case committed by Korean Air's executive in 2014.[18] These cases were emblematic of the abusive relationship between those on the top (*gap*) and those below (*eul*) in the economic hierarchy. To remedy such abusive practices in economic transactions, the Democratic Party formed the Euljiro Committee in 2013. The spoon theory of class, which derives from the English idiom about being born with a silver spoon, also signifies a similar sentiment about the impossibility of class mobility between those who are born with a gold spoon (parents' material and social capital) and those with a clay spoon (parents' humble social status). It was the most searched term on social media for the entire year of 2015[19] and reflects "a local response to the global problem of rising wealth inequality [and] channels anger about inherited wealth and the failure of the political system to rectify it" (Kim 2017, 840).

The spoon theory that at first seemed like anecdotal satire was proved to be a real story when Choi Soon-sil was found to have secured her daughter's

16. These terms were first used in online communities like DC Inside and then offline media and commentators used the terms in their writing.
17. *Yonhap News*, last modified September 18, 2015, https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20150916129800033.
18. Korean Air is a part of Hanjin Group, one of the top ten conglomerates in Korea.
19. *Chosun ilbo*, last modified December 30, 2015, http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2015/12/30/2015123000311.html.

admission to Ehwa Womans University by thwarting admissions rules. Choi, abusing her relationship with President Park, threatened the university's administrators and professors to gain admission for her daughter, who was under-qualified for regular admission. This corruption incident revealed the extent of special privileges bestowed to individuals born with a *gold spoon* and enraged the majority of Ehwa Womans University students who had earned their admissions by merit and hard work. The campus-wide protests organized by students, faculty, and alumni in late September and early October 2016 to demand a thorough investigation not only led to further investigation of the Park-Choi corruption case but spearheaded the eruption of candlelight rallies in late October.

This section discussed the process through which socioeconomic inequality was articulated as a key agenda in public discourse and electoral politics prior to the Candlelight Protests of 2016 and 2017. Korean civil society and progressive political forces recognized inequality as a serious domestic political problem exacerbated by a democratic reversal under a conservative government that emboldened the collusion between political elites and the economically powerful. Concurrent with the discourse-making around issues of disparity, a sense of social inequity, unfairness, and injustice was simmering under the Lee and Park administrations. Thus, when demonstrations were organized to protest the presidential scandal, inequality issues were included as an important example of government failure as well as an integral task of post-Park democracy in Korea.

Inequality and the Candlelight Protests of 2016–2017

The candlelight protest in 2016 was prompted by the disclosure of unprecedented political irregularities committed by President Park and her personal friend who held no public position. As investigative reporting and special prosecutors unearthed the extent of the massive corruption scandal, popular resistance grew to raise a fundamental critique of Korean society and demand various reform agenda. Although individual and family-based participation was more common than organizational mobilization,

the Saturday protest was far from a spontaneous, unorganized event. Civil society was swift to form the People's Action for the Immediate Resignation of President Park, or People's Action (*Toejin haengdong* in short in Korean) for short, as an umbrella group of some 2,300 civic organizations to coordinate their action for mass demonstrations.[20] The People's Action set the agenda for each rally based on suggestions and feedback from citizens, prepared the protest logistics, including the stage and audiovisual equipment at Gwanghwamun Square, arranged speakers and artists for performances, and collected donations from individuals and organizations to finance the protest expenses. Such seamless organization of mega rallies is unthinkable without the movement infrastructure and expertise that Korean civic groups have accumulated over the past decades of contentious politics.[21]

As the protest continued over several months, Gwanghwamun Square turned into a huge school for democracy education for millions of citizens every Saturday. Individuals of all walks of life and ages gathered and protested, studying the Korean Constitution and articulating vibrant ideas about what democracy should look like. The political demands raised during the protest were not limited to bringing President Park and her cliques to legal justice but expanded to call for a fundamental shift in the status quo of the political system. Beginning with the November 19 protest, it was evident that People's Action had begun to provide a unifying agenda to protest participants and to coordinate the protest at the national level (Lee et al. 2017).

Citizens pointed out the deep-seated predicaments present in and reinforced by the existing power structure and framed them in the language of *jeokpye* (deep-rooted vices). People's Action then officially adopted

20. People's Action website, last modified, May 24, 2017, http://www.bisang2016.net/b/archive03/2482.

21. Korea's civic organizations, organized at the national-scale with a sizeable number of full-time activists and policy experts, have demonstrated both the agenda-making capacity and protest mobilization power during and after democratization. Waves of mass demonstrations continued to erupt after the democratic transition with demands for political reform and socioeconomic rights. These experiences over several decades have built the infrastructure and expertise of South Korean civic groups to politicize important social issues and to mobilize the public around them (Lee 2014).

jeokpye in the protest banners, posters, and slogans on December 17, 2016 when the eighth Saturday protest was organized (People's Action 2017). According to People's Action, the *jeokpye* included democracy without equality, as in the unbridled power of the *chaebol*, state-business collusion, and the implementation of anti-labor laws, state failures at public safety and accountability, as in the Sewol ferry disaster, the haunting persistence of authoritarian politics, as in government-sponsored history textbooks, blacklisting of dissidents, muzzling of the press, and the occasions of subservient diplomatic relations, as with the agreement with Japan over the "comfort women" issue and the questionable installation of the American THAAD project.[22] These were the representative political steps adopted by the conservative government under Lee and Park and were critiqued as violation of democratic principles and negligence of government accountability.

Table 2 summarizes the progression of the Candlelight Protests from October 29, 2016 to February 11, 2017, with the number of protest participants and the weekly theme that People's Action chose. This shows not only the growing scale of the protests, but also how the key issues raised in the protest broadened from the resignation of President Park to the eradication of *jeokpye*, the imprisonment of *chaebol* owners, and transformation of *hell Joseon* to a new world.

22. People's Action website, last modified December 29, 2016, http://www.bisang2016.net/b/archive03/1052.

Table 2. Candlelight Protest: Number of Participants and Weekly Themes

Date	Number of participants	Weekly themes
October 26, 2016	20,000	Unite and rage for the stepping down of Park Geun-hye
November 5, 2016	200,000	Unite and rage for the stepping down of Park Geun-hye
November 12, 2016	1 million	People's uprising to end the Park regime
November 19, 2016	600,000	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye
November 26, 2016	1.5 million	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye
December 3, 2016	1.7 million	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye
December 10, 2016	800,000	Day to end the Park regime[a]
December 17, 2016	650,000	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye and eradication of *jeokpye*
December 24, 2016	600,000	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye, early impeachment, and eradication of *jeokpye*
December 31, 2016	1 million	Goodbye Park and Happy New Year
January 7, 2017	600,000	Bring down Park Geun-hye, bring up the Sewol ferry
January 14, 2017	130,000	Immediate resignation of Park Geun-hye, early impeachment, and imprisonment of *chaebol* owners
January 21, 2017	320,000	Bring down Park, let's change *hell Joseon*
February 4, 2017	400,000	Impeach Park in February, imprison collaborators, and act on candlelight reform
February 11, 2017	700,000	A new world with the imprisonment of Park Geun-hye and *chaebol* owners

Source: Author's notes from media reports (*Hankyoreh sinmun* and *Chosun ilbo*) and information from People's Action website.

Note: The number of protest participants includes only those in Seoul. Weekly themes that include inequality issues are underlined.

[a] The National Assembly passed the impeachment move on December 9.

At Gwanghwa-mun Square, protest participants created various booths and cultural artifacts to visibly represent their demands. While making satire of the misdeeds committed by President Park and her cronies and remembering the Sewol tragedy were the most visible themes on the protest scenes, emphasizing state-business collusion, the involvement of *chaebol*s, and the repression of labor were other important subjects that were transformed into

protest objects.[23] The two pictures below were taken during the candlelight protest in December 2016 and show the cultural articulation of Park-*chaebol* (Samsung, Hyundai, and Kia) collusion as well as the *chaebol*s' anti-labor practices. Figure 1 demonstrates that the corrupt regime consists of President Park and major *chaebol* corporations such as Samsung and Hyundai. Figure 2 highlights *chaebol* involvement in labor repression and union destruction, with a banner demanding legal justice to the employers responsible for unfair labor practices. For several months in 2016 and 2017, Gwanghwamun Square offered an arena where citizens came out to directly express their profound frustration with the status quo while voicing rich imaginations of what Korean society should aim for after eliminating the old vices. And one of the key old vices was the economic structure centered on a small number of large corporations that were responsible for disparity and unfairness.

Figure 1. An artifact showing the collusion of Park Geun-hye, Lee Jae-yong (CEO of Samsung), and Jeong Mong-gu (CEO of Hyundai Automobile), Gwanghwamun Square, Seoul, December 2016.
Source: Courtesy of Judy Han (2016).

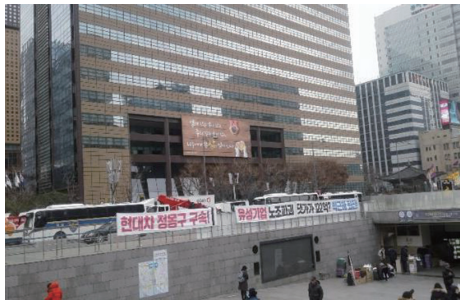

Figure 2. Banners condemning *chaebol* involvement in labor repression and demanding legal justice, Gwanghwa-mun Square, Seoul, December 2016.
Source: Author.

23. Author's participatory observation of the candlelight protests on December 3, 10, and 17, 2016.

The importance of addressing socioeconomic inequality in post-Park democracy was demonstrated not only in the language of *jeokpye* that was widely shared during the protest, but also in public surveys taken during the protest period. A public poll conducted by *Naeil sinmun* and Korea Research in January 2017 included five questions on public perceptions on inequality issues. As summarized in Table 3, Koreans think wealth distribution is unfair (64.2%) and hold pessimistic views about merit-based upward mobility (57.7%). For most Koreans, wealth disparity is a serious issue (94.2%) and was the most central social conflict (40.1 percent of respondents ranked it as number 1). When respondents were asked about the most important issue in the presidential scandal, they ranked political and economic collusion second, behind political irregularities committed by Park.

Another survey undertaken by *Naeil sinmun* and the Contemporary Politics Research Center in December 2016 finds no significant class difference among the protest participants, but finds citizen discontent over economic inequality as a crucial driving force behind their attendance in the Saturday protests. As compared in Table 4, those who agreed that wealth distribution was unfair, income disparity was serious, and class mobility was impossible, joined the protests in higher rates than those who disagreed.

Table 3. What Koreans Think about Inequality

Survey Questions	Answers	
Do you think wealth distribution is fair in our society?	Yes (14.5%)	No (64.2%)
Do you agree that "anyone can make an upward mobility based on efforts"?	Yes (41.8%)	No (57.7%)
What do you think about wealth disparity in our society?	Serious (94.2%)	Not serious (5.2%)
Which conflict is most serious in our society?	Wealth Inequality (40.1%)	Ideological Divide (33.2%)
What is the most important issue in the presidential scandal?	Irregularities Committed by Park (42.5%)	Political & Economic Collusion (30.4%)
Have you participated in the candlelight protest?	Yes (23.9%)	No (76%)

Source: Naeil sinmun and *Korea Research*, "New Year's Survey, 2017" (sample size: 1200).

Note: The numbers do not add up to 100 percent because those who responded "I don't know" or "No response" were omitted.

Table 4. Perception of Socioeconomic Inequality and Protest Participation

Survey Questions	Agree / Protest Participation	Do not Agree / Protest Participation
Wealth Distribution is Unfair	1,011 (85.5%) / 259 (25.6%)	174 (14.5%) / 28 (16.1%)
Income Disparity is Serious	1,130 (94.8%) / 280 (24.8%)	62 (5.2%) / 7 (11.3%)
Class Mobility is Impossible	692 (58%) / 190 (27.6)	501 (42%) / 95 (19%)

Source: Authors' reconstruction of Table 3-13 in Lee et al. (2017, 158).

In another survey taken in early 2017 before the confirmation of the presidential impeachment, members of the general public and experts were asked to rank the most important reform issues for post-Park democracy. Table 5 compares the ranking of issues by the general respondents and by experts. Although the ranking differs between these two groups of respondents, it shows the importance of the inequality agenda for Korea's reformed democratic politics. Ordinary respondents ranked lessening economic inequality and reforming the *chaebol* as the third and fourth most important, while expert respondents ranked these as the first and second most important.

Table 5. What is Most Needed for a Better Democracy in Korea?

Ranking	General Public	Experts
1	Political Independence and Fairness of the Prosecutor's Office (19.9%)	Lessening Economic Inequality (30.4%)
2	Citizens' Direct Participation (13.7%)	Reforming the *Chaebol* (17.4%)
3	Lessening Economic Inequality (13.6%)	Citizens' Direct Participation (13.1%)
4	Reforming the *Chaebol* (11%)	Reducing Presidential Powers (13.1%)
5	Media Freedom (10.9%)	Political Independence and Fairness of the Prosecutor's office (6.5%)

Source: Hankyoreh sinmun, February 13, 2017 (sample size: 1,000 citizens and 23 experts).

The immediate cause behind the popular gatherings at Gwanghwamun Square was President Park's and her personal friend's egregious abuses of power. But there was a deeper and broader concern that assembled people for the candlelight protests that lasted for almost six months. This was a profound rage that the system was rigged to disproportionally advantage the few with economic and political power and that government officials were incapable of responding to ordinary citizen grievances over the soaring inequality and inequity in Korean society. Citizens voiced that economic democratization should be an integral component of political democracy in any post-Park politics. The centrality of material disparity in the protest agenda of 2016–2017 comes from progressive civil society's work to actively politicize socioeconomic inequality issues that have been on the rise over the last twenty years.

Conclusion

This paper examined the political articulation of inequality in the Candlelight Protests of 2016–2017 that erupted against the Park-Choi corruption scandal by emphasizing the theoretical importance of tracing the process and actors involved in the framing of social grievances. Along with growing material disparity in Korean society over the last twenty years, civil society and progressive political forces worked together to turn the objective indicators of inequality into a public discourse and political agenda in the 2000s prior to the Candlelight Protests. Furthermore, as the protest extended over several months, movement actors and participants broadened the imagination of Korea's to-be-restored democracy by identifying socioeconomic disparities as an important component of the reform agenda. The core demands of the protest movement were not limited to bringing President Park and the corrupt cliques to legal justice, but were inclusive of a broad and deep critique of Korea's existing political-economic structure. Participating citizens highlighted values of fairness, equity, and justice to be restored in South Korean society. They particularly identified state-business collusion and the disproportional power exercised by large conglomerates (*chaebol*) as the culprit of rising inequality and demanded economic democratization to

substantiate democratic politics in Korea.

The examination of the political articulation of economic hardship prior and during the Candlelight Protests in Korea demonstrates that deteriorating material conditions under the neoliberal global economy are not doomed to backslide to authoritarian politics and xenophobic nationalism as observed in a number of established democracies. A close investigation of the agency of discourse-making and claim representation reveals that rising inequality may lead to the strengthening of democracy depending on who and how inequality is framed and articulated in the political arena. South Korea shows a new possibility for democratic politics where civil society and progressive political forces capitalized on the notion of economic democratization by linking economic equity and fairness as a central component of democratic governance.

As of this writing, in their first trials Park Geun-hye was sentenced to twenty-four years in prison and Lee Myung-bak to fifteen years. In May 2017, when President Moon Jae-in was sworn in, his administration announced the top five task areas requiring policy reform in the following order: (1) government of the people, (2) an economy of shared affluence, (3) a state for social welfare, (4) shared growth of all regions, (5) peace and prosperity for the Korean Peninsula (Advisory Committee on State Affairs 2017). Among these five areas, three are addressing socioeconomic inequality issues, reflecting the urgency of the new administration to respond to the political demands raised during the Candlelight Protests. These task areas are indicative of the Moon administration's policy priority on dismantling the *chaebol* oligopoly to restore market fairness, creating jobs especially for the young, lessening the labor market duality between permanent and temporary employment, and expanding social protection to address soaring inequality.

However, the most noticeable achievement of the Moon Jae-in government in the last two years was the improvement of inter-Korea relations, not economic issues. With the exception of several measures taken to address notable labor issues,[24] economic policies to promote job creation,

24. These include the conversion of irregular workers to regular employment at the Seoul-Incheon International Airport in 2017, the reinstatement of female irregular workers who were dismissed from the Korea Train Express back in 2006, and the tripartite-commission-mediated agreement to re-employ Ssangyong's dismissed workers.

income redistribution, and fair market competition have so far produced few tangible outcomes. The minimum wage policy, for instance, was met by fierce opposition from small businesses and its implementation was watered down to the extent of losing the efficacy of raising the minimum wage. In Korea, where socioeconomic inequality has become a key political agenda, citizens would perceive the Moon administration's failure to address economic woes as a serious democratic deficit, which may become a trigger for another wave of protest movements.

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