

CHARACTERISTICS AND MEANING OF THE CANDLELIGHT MOVEMENT IN KOREA

Lee Sanghak

Transparency International Korea

ABSTRACT

From November 2016 to March 2017, a historical new movement arose in Korea. The movement which is called the Candlelight Movement was organized not by a certain organizations such as CSOs but by ordinary citizens themselves, and at last caused President Park Geunhye to be impeached and arrested. This movement has several different characteristics from precedent movements that happened in Korea, as it already lead to many changes, such as legislative reforms and proved that there is a huge potential for social democracy.

RESUMEN

De noviembre de 2016 a marzo de 2017, surgió un nuevo movimiento histórico en Corea. El movimiento, que se llama Candlelight Movement, no fué organizado por organizaciones, como ONG, sino por ciudadanos comunes, y finalmente originó que la presidenta Park Geunhye fuera acusada y arrestada. Este movimiento tiene varias características diferentes de los movimientos precedentes que ocurrieron en Corea, ya que condujo a numerosos cambios, tales como reformas legislativas, y demostró que hay un gran potencial para la democracia social.

The historic 'Candlelight Movement' which lasted from November 2016 to March 2017 swept throughout the country. Newspapers said around 17 million citizens participated in the movement from children to senior people. Actually every sector and generation came together at Gwanghwamoon square.

The reason for the eruption of this movement was the news that President Park's avatar Choi Soonsil arbitrarily controlled many national affairs. On hearing this news, the citizenry became filled with anger at the manner with which President Park had turned over the public power without the people's approval, to her friend Choi Soonsil. The initial demonstration, which had started at the weekend of the report about the tablet PC, was held with few protesters but the news of this rally spread among many people through internet and SNS. Subsequently, tens of thousands of protesters turned up in the street and condemned the Park administration's political scandal. This made many citizens to withdraw the public trust delegated to Park, and they asked for her immediate resignation from her presidential post.

Choi Soonsil and Park Geunhye share a long history. During Park Chung Hee's (father of Park Geunhye) tenure as President of Korea in the 1970s, Choi Taemin (father of Choi Soonsil)

was the former's mentor and friend. This friendship was formed when the Park family was in mourning over the tragic death of their wife and mother, First Lady Yuk Youngsoo, in 1974. From that time, the Park and Choi families friendship was established and the relationship between the two sets remained until recently. There had been many suspicious rumours about the existence of secret powerful people near President Park Geunhye for a long time, and most of the rumours were related to the Choi family.

The tablet personal computer which had enormous suspicious information about the relationship between Park and Choi, revealed many documents and information to suggest that Choi was acting as a close confidante for the President. According to the judgments of court which were announced recently, Park, Choi and Park's senior staff members used their influence to extort hundreds of billions of Won from Korean conglomerates - Samsung, Lotte, and SK. Choi Soonsil, in conspiracy with Park, accepted the bribe of 7 million US\$ for her daughter's dressage activities including three thoroughbred horses such as Salvator, Rausing, and Vitano V.

At the demonstration, citizens demanded that National Assembly impeach President Park and asked the prosecution to conduct a thorough investigation of the scandal. As a result, the citizens' power that erupted at the plaza candlelight compelled the National Assembly to impeach President Park by absolute majority including the ruling party lawmakers and lead the prosecution to arrest and charge President Park. In the end, Park Geunhye and Choi Soonsil were given 24 years and 20 years sentences respectively at the first trial.

We can find many meaningful aspects in this historic candlelight movement conducted in Korea. At this juncture, I would like to suggest some characteristics and meaning of the movement.

Firstly, I want to explain the main participants or the main agents of the movement.

You may be aware that there have been several civil society movements in Korean history. In 1960, a large demonstration occurred which was triggered by the fraudulent election of then President Lee Syngman, and this resulted in his resignation. At that time, the main driving agents were students and their power became the main agency of the democratization movement until the 1980s. The university campus was the centre of this social movement for a long time, especially under military or coercive regimes. The democratization movement of the 1980s which rejected the seize of power by the military was also started from university students. But in the process of the demonstration, many ordinary citizens sympathized with the students and some citizens participated at the movement. The most heated demonstration happened in May 1980 at the Gwangju province city located southwest of the Korean peninsula, and ordinary citizens participated on a large scale at that demonstration. We call it the 'Gwangju Democratic Movement'. After 1980, student movements became more active and more popular in the university society and participation by another sectors, especially some labour organizations, began to vitalize as a social democratization movement.

These processes have accumulated civil movement energies and made social democratization issues more familiar around Korean society. These accumulated efforts became the catalyst for an historic turning point in 1987, which was placed as a monument to democratization and people's power in Korea. The Korean social movement after 1987 can be featured as a rank and file movement of workers and issue fighting movement of civil society organizations. Under the influence of the 1987 democratization movement, workers from several sectors organized trade unions. Until that time, organizing trade unions was very difficult and independent union activity was impossible because the government forbade democratic and autonomous trade union activities. There was a gigantic wave of trade union movements from summer 1987, the number of organized workers in trade union increased dramatically and the

strikes by workers spread throughout the country. It is said that Korean workers came on as an active agency in the society at that time. The conflict between workers and the business sector was one of the most hotly reported issues during the 1990s.

Another social movement was conducted by civil society organizations which was started in earnest in early 1990s. In fact, non-governmental organizational activities began at that time. The NGO movement was also very rapidly spreading all around the society and gained considerable influence in society and politics. While trade unions focused on the movement of the rank and file, the civil society movement concentrated on the current issues affecting society. Their concerns spanned from political problems, and economic issues to issues related to the everyday life of ordinary people.

In the period before the candlelight movement, we can find the leading agency which made the starting point of the demonstration, identify the beginning action and also explain the reason for the demonstration. From this point of view, I want to highlight the following: we cannot find any leading agencies or leading groups in this candlelight movement that we can say are the catalysts for the emergence of this social movement which do not have any traditional leading group or leadership.

The candlelight movement actually did not have a specific leader group and citizens participated of their own accord, using several networks for communication each other. Citizens spontaneously carried out fund-raising for the cost of assembly and many small community members including high school student circles and neighbourhood-mother meeting members handed out several materials such as hot packs, candles, and refreshments for the demonstration's participants. The heart and passion of millions of citizens created tremendous power which changed Korean history.

After all, I want to emphasize that the candlelight movement has a characteristic feature that was initiated by unspecified individuals, and spread over other unspecified individuals especially by the SNS networks. The candlelight demonstrations in 2002, 2004, and 2016-2017 have very similar patterns in mobilization and organization.

From a rational perspective, this pattern is a little unusual. When we think about a social movement, we always pay attention to leadership, leading ideology and necessary organization and resources etc. For example, the Resource Orientation theory says the success of movement depends upon the ability to mobilize resources which are necessary for such movement.

Secondly, I wish to discuss the way of movement that participants exert to achieve their goal.

It was totally peaceful and they did not use any violence, only candlelights and pickets were used for their movement and they gathered at the plaza and marched alongside the originally scheduled route. It has been customary to see clashes between protesters and policemen for a long time. Especially under a military regime, police usually fire tear gas and water cannons and mobilized riot policemen against demonstrators. Some years ago, one man was seriously injured by the water cannons fired by policemen and subsequently died at hospital. But among the candlelight rallies and marches, there was not any violation or conflict between participants and the police. Participants did not litter in the street and kept things clean around the plaza. In the past when clashes between protests and police occurred, the streets were filled with debris including waste paper and goods used for demonstration. However this activity has changed at the Candlelight rally and march.

Thirdly, what is the main motive of the participants in the movement?

When we talk about the motive of participation in this movement, interest, ideology, discrimination, alienation, and morality are usually mentioned. Several motives would be combined in a certain movement and it is not so easy to divide clearly. But I think the political and economic aspects are the most important in nearly all movements that happened in South Korea since 1960. More so the dominant factors of the 1960, 1980, 1987 movements come from political problems, but we can also find the background resources of those movements from an economic perspective.

Many specialists say that the energy of the Candlelight movement is vastly different from several preceding movements in Korea, and many of them define the core reason why the Candle movement arose from discontent - unfairness, injustice and non-transparency. It was stated that people became infuriated when the power group including President Park violated virtues of civil society - fairness based on equality and openness. The distribution of rewards to those who do not deserve to get such things without resorting to transparent and open criteria which would be the basis of immoral politics.

Most citizens think many unfair things happened during the regimes of Lee Myungbak and Park Geunhye. In the labour market, misconduct was prevalent as, for example, several state-owned enterprises got involved in corrupt forms of staffs recruitment. Kangwon Land which is one of the state-owned companies recruited most of their new staff via soliciting from powerful men including National Assembly members.

For ten years, many people ask "who are the owners of DAS?". The former president Lee Myungbak was placed under arrest last week on charges of bribery and actually owned this company DAS in the name of his relatives. He seems to be a beneficial owner of DAS and earns large sums of money secretly from DAS. He was also charged with obtaining bribes from the National Intelligence Service and Samsung and other peoples.

A great tragedy occurred in April 2015. The Sewol ship which sailed from Incheon to Jeju island sunk accidentally. More than 300 persons died as a result, most of the victims being students, but President Park at that time did nothing to ensure the safe retrieval of those on board, instead staying in her bedroom until late morning. Subsequently newspaper reports stated that there were several corruption allegations surrounding the sinking of the Sewol ferry for a long time.

Another important thing I want to emphasize is that many young students took to the streets. Nowadays young people including college students do not pay any attention nor do they participate in any social demonstrations despite their predecessors acting as a leading group in Korean social movements. They say students including middle and high school students have been very angry at the unfairness in college entrance examinations and this was the impetus for students to participate in the demonstration. In addition, students became upset on hearing that Jung YooRa -daughter of Choi SoonSil- matriculated into a university without following the appropriate entrance processes. These series of problematic matters made the ordinary public angry and they withdrew their support for the ruling party and President Park.

Fourthly, in the process of the Candlelight demonstration, the citizens wanted to make a right society rather than a good society.

They asked for the fulfillment of social justice and became a broader basis of mobilization. Discussions about a good society can necessarily imply what goals should be achieved, and this will bring about competition of values to be attained between groups. These would inevitably accompany discussions and conflicts among the participants of the movement.

The target of the candlelight movement was to realize a just society and participants slogans were related to things such as equal opportunity, fairness, transparency, impartiality, anti-corruption, etc. Generally speaking, participants of the Candle movement focused on the past oriented issues rather than the future oriented issues. Most of the slogans appeared at the street were more focused on denouncing the wrongdoing of the past rather than the programmes of future society. They focused on means rather than ends.

Fifth, the participants created a totally different community at the movement compared with everyday life in Korean society. Personally, everyday life in Seoul is very competitive and has become more hard-hearted. We encounter many severe attitudes of people in the street. Korea is one of most populated areas globally, and the Seoul metropolitan city is a densely populated city within the peninsula. Almost 20 million people - nearly half of the total population - live and work in the Seoul metropolitan city area. The Korean people experienced very rapid industrialization and urbanization and they also witnessed the rapid collapse of communities such as traditional villages, close-knit neighbourhoods, and the collapse of traditional relationships between family members and their neighbours. Many of them live separated into small family units or by themselves. The change from a residential environment to apartments caused a more separated and isolated living condition. Therefore I always find that the small community such as neighbourhood community, small local communities, or a large family community in everyday life become fade away day by day. I sometimes satirize these situations as citizens who were separated before televisions and smart phones and isolated from community.

However, we could face a totally different community at the Candlelight movement space. Everybody paid greater and higher consideration for other participants and exercised generosity towards the feelings of fellow citizens. Participants of the movement constructed a very different community in which we could find understanding and empathy for their neighbours, generous and charitable sentiments for other people, virtue of modesty, keeping public order etc.

Sixth, how can we describe the character of the movement?

Many people including president Moon Jae In say the candlelight movement was a revolution, but others including some specialists do not go along with calling it as a revolution. I do not think it is a revolution, and as such do not make any concrete assumptions of fundamental and rapid changes of mechanism in social operation. This movement impeached former President Park through constitutional process, so in this sense it was not a revolution. But the absolute power of the president above law which had been inherited from the authoritarian regime became prohibited. The constitution that led to presidential impeachment is not limited to only one president. This it can be the most meaningful result of the movement.

We can only find the possibility and potentiality for distinct changes. The Candlelight Movement did not change social structure and contents, but the movement involves enormous potentiality for change. After the candlelight movement, the abuse of power in all around society become the most hot issue. Many people whistle-blow the abuse of power in several organizations and communities such as company, political sector, church, school and university, government office, theater company, etc. The disclose movement of abuse of power is started from #me-too. One woman prosecutor expose the sexual harrassment from her superior at TV. After that several theatrical people accuse one person, who is very famous theatrical director, of doing several rapes and sexual harrassment using his power of director. Nowadays these exposures spread to the companies where the violation of human rights happened continuously by the ower of company. I think these movements come from the candlelight movement and these movement can become energy for a social change.

Seventh, what is the role of president Moon?

Professor Choi Jangjip said, in order to make the meaning of the candlelight movement as a significant transition momentum, it is necessary to enhance the level of state capacity and properly practice representation as a governing institution of a democratic country, through which we should create the moment of government that can nurture state's capacity. He also said it is time to focus on the operation of the nation. It is necessary to design policies in priority order and take interest in developing the society in practice.

President Park was impeached March 2017 and President Moon Jae In was elected as the new president in May 2017. President Moon has continuously stated that he was the president of the candlelight revolution and he will try to realize the spirit of this movement. We can say that president Moon has been selected by history in order to be used to realize the zeitgeist of the candlelight movement. So the success of President Moon depends on his success at materializing the spirit of the Candlelight Movement. They say the philosophy of this movement is the realization of freedom, equality, fairness, and justice. In order to realize such a philosophy, it is necessary to investigate the truth on violation of human rights committed by former regimes and establishments. It is also needful to realize equality by solving labour market problems including wage and workplace discrimination. Also in order to achieve justice in society, all of society has to endeavour to get rid of the legacies from the past including patrimonialism, privileges, nepotism, unfair practices, and discrimination throughout society.

The Moon government has started to practice several reformation policies focused on cleaning up deep rooted social evils. This includes investigations by the prosecution and police into suspicious activities carried out by past governments, and some government policy implemented during the previous governments. Many people support a series of reformation policies of government and the participation of civil society has become more active in this government. We can understand the response of citizens from the approval rating for president Moon which is higher than 70%.

CONCLUSIONS

In closing, I want to expound on the role and challenge of Transparency International Korea.

The civil society movement became a very powerful movement and had exerted huge influence in the society since the 1990s, but nowadays the influence of civil society in Korea has become weaker, and the leadership of civil society organizations (CSO) is not strong enough. Actually in the process of the candlelight movement, CSOs did not have any leading ability and could not show leadership to the citizens at the street. Members of CSOs only participate as one person or one organization in the movement. The main actors in the candlelight movement have been the citizens themselves and media which gave information about the scandal of president Park and the Prosecution and the Constitutional Court that investigated and ruled on the matter.

I want to find these results from the social situation in which the confidence in any establishment including CSOs is awfully low and citizens are individualized and separated. I think these situation of CSOs are a big challenge the civil society organizations have to solve. Nevertheless we can find some good signs from the citizenship alongside the candlelight movement. Many people try to do something for more solidarity and a fair society after the candlelight movement. For example, there is a huge wave of 'Me too' movement and they ask for equality between genders throughout the society. Additionally, some movements occurred for the solidarity between workers to create a more equal society.

TI-Korea is faced with this opportunity and challenge. The candlelight movement and the policy of president Moon make a large space for this anti-corruption movement. This space can be the opportunity for us to take brisk action. Conversely, the room opened by the movement would make a substantial change in civil society movement patterns, and this change paradoxically can be a big challenge to existing CSOs including TI-Korea. We have to work hard and develop more ideas to get into the more advanced movement.

Until now, corruption is one of the most important issues in Korea. Korea received 54 points and ranks 51st among 180 countries and territories in the 2017 Corruption Perception Index (CPI). It is a very shameful score compare with Korea's status in economic and other aspects. In these processes, people express some expectations to TI-korea to conduct more activities geared towards forming a clean society. These situations can give us more opportunities. But, in order to meet such expectations of people and society, the onus is on TI-Korea to do more with regards to strengthening mobility, popularity, and professionalism which in turn enhances social accountability.