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**South Korea's Tamed Populism:
Popular Protests From Below and Populist Politics from the Top**

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Introduction

The rise of populism throughout the world has drawn much attention. Rightist populism in advanced economies, including many European countries and the US in particular, has alarmed democracy researchers.¹ Foa and Mounk have coined the phrase “deconsolidation of democracy” to describe the dangerous trend of declining support for democracy in the US.² Many scholars have attributed the difficulties of governing to economic decline and divisive migration issues, and they argue that poor government performance in dealing with these issues has delegitimized many democracies.³ Regardless of whether we characterize the situation as a more sustained decline or merely a temporary setback, the current crisis of democracy in the West is not only threatening democracy at home but also contributing to a global downturn of democracy. Domestically, populist protests and the successful entry of populist parties into legislatures are undermining the political stability of European democracies. Trumpism has transformed already polarized American politics into tribalism, with members of opposite sides treating their opponents as enemies. This rightist populism is antagonistic to transnational institutions as well as international rules and norms. As politically disrupted democracies fail to actively promote the liberal international order, authoritarian states have become emboldened in breaking international rules and expanding their influence, and Western democracies have ceased to make unified efforts to support democracy throughout the world.

However, this seemingly negative influence of populism on democracy calls for deeper debate, since populism is after all claiming that the majority of people deserve better governance. In developing countries where democracy is not yet fully institutionalized, popular movements which demand that the interests of ordinary citizens be addressed can help promote democratization. This paper reviews major concepts and issues in the

¹ Michael Bröning, “The Rise of Populism in Europe: Can the Center Hold?,” *Foreign Affairs*, last modified June 3, 2016, <http://foreignaffairs.com/print/1117623>; Matthew Goodwin, *Right Response: Understanding and Countering Populist Extremism in Europe* (Chatham House, 2011), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/r0911_goodwin.pdf; Thomas Greven, *The Rise of Right-wing Populism in Europe and the United States: A Comparative Perspective* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, May 2016), http://fesdc.org/fileadmin/user_upload/publications/RightwingPopulism.pdf; Sook Jong Lee, “The Rise of Korean Youth as a Political Force: Implications for the US-Korea Alliance,” in *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2003-2004*, eds. Richard C. Bush et al. (Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, Brookings Institution, 2004), 15-30.

² Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Danger of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 3 (2016): 5-17; Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, “The Signs of Deconsolidation,” *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 1 (2017): 5-15

³ Larry Diamond, “Facing Up to the Democratic Recession,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 1 (2015): 141-155; Francis Fukuyama, “Why Is Democracy Performing So Poorly?” in *Democracy in Decline?*, eds. Larry Diamond and Marc F. Plattner (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2016): 11-24.

study of populism, and then applies them to the case of South Korea, where popular movements have been strong. Several popular protests as well as populist politics will be examined and discussed to illustrate ways that South Korean populism is unique and how it plays out in terms of its influence on the quality of the country's democracy.

Concepts and Functions of Populism

While populism has been discussed avidly over the last decade, the concept of populism is quite messy in terms of its degree of applicability to diverse forms of political mobilization. According to Kaltwasser et al., the term populism was first used to describe the nineteenth century political movement that spanned both sides of the Atlantic and later emerged in Latin America in the early twentieth century.⁴ Kaltwasser et al. state that scholarship on populism began to expand in the 1950s, with research increasing greatly during and after the 1990s. Populism became a pejorative term understood to mean political decay. However, the history of populist movements and even the diversity found in contemporary populism defy this negative description. Populism usually damages established political institutions, but at the same time, it can lead to further democratization of governing systems. Therefore, it seems to be more productive to approach populism without prior judgement and to examine its context and impacts.

Laclau deserves scholarly attention since he tried to correct “the denigration of the masses” applied to the study of populism and to give populism its own logic as a way of constructing the political.⁵ Rather than offering a concise definition of populism, he delineates three preconditions for the emergence of populism; (1) the formation of an internal antagonistic frontier separating “the people” from power, (2) an equivalent articulation of demands making the emergence of “the people” possible, and (3) the unification of these various demands into a stable system of signification if the first two preconditions are developed to the point of political union.⁶ According to Laclau, we construct the social either through the assertion of a particular—logic of difference—or through a partial surrender of particularities for their shared common—the logic of equivalence. With this latter equivalential articulation cutting across new and more heterogeneous social groups, a plurality of demands constitute a broader social subjectivity to form “popular demands” and “the people” as a historical actor is constituted. The more extended the equivalential chain develops extensionally to embrace heterogeneous social demands, however, the poorer a popular identity linking these demands becomes intensionally and it comes to function as an empty signifier.⁷ Laclau's insightful conceptualization is useful in understanding the rise and fall of populism.

While there is no consensus on a single definition of populism, there are several definitions of populism which are widely used. Mudde⁸ defines populism as “an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, ‘the pure people’ versus ‘the corrupt elite,’ and which argues that

⁴ Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017. “Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-13.

⁵ Preface and Part I of Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason*, Verso, 2005.

⁶ Laclau emphasizes the unit of populism should be “demand,” much smaller than the group, to become the signifier of a wider universality. For the preconditions of populism, see pp. 72-83.

⁷ Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (Verso, 2005), pp. 95-96.

⁸ Cas Mudde, “Populism: An Ideational Approach,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 27-47; Cas Mudde, “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 543.

politics should be an expression of the general will of the people.”⁹ Muller offers a more concise definition of “a kind of identity politics that champions the people as morally superior and opposes pluralism as a tool of elites.” He regards anti-elitism and anti-pluralism as the most essential characteristics of populism. Essentially, populism is understood to be based on the concept of morality and doing the right thing for the people, not on class divisions; however, populists may have different socioeconomic interests. Therefore, populism attaches to leftist or rightist ideologies. In the literature on populism, Latin American populism is more often characterized as leftist, while recent European populism is described as rightist. For this reason, Taggart and Mudde characterize populism as having a thin-centered nature.¹⁰

Anti-elitist politics is the common core element shared by the various scholarly attempts to define populism. As a “permanent shadow of modern representative democracy,” populist politics have existed whenever the ruling elites of a government and the legislature fail to represent the will of the majority.¹¹ This current iteration has grown more visible as populist forces have become a powerful and disrupting influence on politics. Populism is based on the principle of popular sovereignty, which is an integral element of democracy. Therefore, one cannot say that populism is undemocratic or anti-democratic. It is a sort of radical democracy wherein people wish to express their will directly rather than through the representatives they have voted for. The Yellow Vest movement that quickly mobilized in late November 2018 in France is a good example. People, primarily from rural areas in France, went out to protest against President Emmanuel Macron’s fuel tax hikes with great anger that he was not listening to the large number of people struggling to get by. In this sense, populism can be assessed as positively correcting “democratic deficit” as it strives to hold representatives more accountable or make them more responsive to public demands. Mounk argues that a unique mix of individual rights and popular rule of liberal democracy is coming apart to result in “democracy without rights (illiberal democracy)” and “rights without democracy (undemocratic liberalism).”¹² In a sense, populism is asserting the popular will against the elite-driven “undemocratic liberalism” of urban centers or inter-governmental organizations.

Despite this possible merit, populism is also a negative force owing to its anti-pluralistic nature. Populism divides people into “us” and “them.” When “them” is a weak religious/ethnic minority or a group of culturally different immigrants, their rights are usually rapidly restricted by the majority group of “us.” Rightist populists in Europe and Asia attack and alienate migrants and ethnic minorities under the narratives of nativism and patriotism. Where ethnic or religious divisions are not prominent, populists claim that they alone represent the people, sidelining all other political competitors as illegitimate. Galston argues that populists impose the assumption of uniformity on the reality of diversity, and, in doing so, not only distort the facts but also elevate the characteristics of some social groups over others.¹³ In order to group diverse citizens into the simple dichotomy of “real” or “good” vs. “bad” citizens, populists employ exclusionary identity politics, often accompanied by

⁹ Mudde and Kaltwasser (2012: 5-8) argue that this is the minimal definition shared by the studies on populism that have taken three approaches, i.e., populism as a particular type of political movement appealing to very heterogeneous groups, a political style linking leaders and the electorate, and a discursive construction confronting the existing hegemony.

¹⁰ Paul Taggart, *Populism*. (Open University Press, 2000); Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser et al., 2017. “Populism: An Overview of the Concept and the State of the Art,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 2-13.; Cas Mudde, “The populist zeitgeist.” *Government and opposition* 39, no. 4 (2004): 541-563.

¹¹ Jan-Werner Muller, *What is Populism* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 11.

¹² Yascha Mounk, *The People vs. Democracy: Why Our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 27-28.

¹³ William A. Galston, “The Populist Challenge to Liberal Democracy.” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 29, No. 2, (April 2018): pp. 5-19.

moral rhetoric. If anti-elite populism operates within a vertical structure, i.e. upwards between “the people” and “the elite,” this anti-pluralist populism operates within a horizontal structure between “the good people” and “the bad people.” The bad people are outgroups of immigrants and refugees who are often described as drug dealers, criminals, or foreigners who steal the jobs of natives. The current European populist radical right-wing parties such as the French National Front, the Freedom Party of Austria, and the Belgian Flemish Interest are all good examples of populism combined with nationalism that pit the people as the underdog against migrants and other national outgroups.¹⁴

So far, populism is understood as politics driven upward by the masses. This bottom-up legitimacy of power makes political leaders seek personalistic leadership styles based on direct contact and communication. In this vein, Weyland argues that populism is best defined as a political strategy comprising the methods and instruments of winning and exercising power where political leaders seek or exercise government power based on direct, unmediated, and uninstitutionalized support from large numbers of unorganized followers.¹⁵ Since populism treats people equally, populist leaders try to demonstrate their independence from elite groupings and continue to mobilize mass support by appealing to plebiscites for authoritative decisions. While the authoritative decisions of populist leaders rest on the support of followers as mentioned before, this does not mean that they are exclusively subject to or guided by popular demands. Populist leaders and governments can equally manipulate the masses for their own political gain. In this sense, Ostiguy is right to say that populism is relational between leaders and followers. He explains that the relationship is established and articulated through “low” appeals which resonate within and receive positive reception from particular sectors of society. The “flaunting of the ‘low’” is supported by a particular rapport between leaders and followers, and populist leaders concretely perform representation in an antagonistic way for their supporters. Low sublimed appeals are based on warmer and immediate manners or less mediated procedures in contrast to the high sublimed appeals of colder, abstract, and proper manners and procedures.¹⁶ This socio-cultural approach is useful in understanding why populist leaders prefer to employ Twitter or other forms of social media to make direct and easy appeals, and why people are more receptive to the plain terms of low politics.

Populism also caters to the mob mentality, which demands quick fixes and eschews time-consuming due process and procedures. After all, populists tend to disregard the existing rules and institutions as serving the establishment. Within today’s environment of fluid issue politics, populists can utilize the internet and social media without expending significant resources. They can easily appeal to swathes of dissatisfied and angry people by using simple and sensationalist political discourses. However, when populist sentiments prevail, populist policies are often immune to scientific or empirical checks so that they, once in power, often fail to deliver what they have been advocating. Populism can thus undermine the governability of whoever is in power.

In a nutshell, populism is a thin ideology that holds the will of people as the only legitimate source of governance, which can attach to both right and left ideologies, agrarian movements, and different political systems.

¹⁴ Benjamin De Cleen, “Populism and Nationalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 348-349.

¹⁵ Kurt Weyland, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 55, 59.

¹⁶ Pierre Ostiguy, “Populism: A Socio-Cultural Approach” in *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*, ed. Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, et al. (Oxford University Press, 2017), 73-74, 84-85

Populism is also aligned with personalistic leadership styles based on warm and direct cultural bonding between leaders and followers. Anti-elitism is the most overriding element of populism. When populism is focused on the “ethnos” inside a country it can be anti-pluralistic, allowing a majority ethnic group to achieve a representative hegemony. When populism divorces the sovereign people inside a national territory from those from foreign countries or multilateral institutions, it can converge with nationalism.

These complex elements of populism make its potential impact on democracy negative and also positive. Therefore, one can say that for democracy, populism is a double-edged sword. As Muddle and Kaltwasser maintain,¹⁷ populism can be a corrective or a threat to the quality of democracy. Populism’s positive effects include its ability to bring about participation through the inclusion of marginalized groups by giving them a voice and a way to mobilize; its provision of an ideological bridge that supports the building of important social and political coalitions often across class lines; and its increasing of democratic accountability. On the other hand, populism can become a threat to the quality of democracy by contravening the checks and balances of power and separation of powers, limiting minority rights, making compromise and consensus difficult, undermining the legitimacy and power of institutions and governing bodies, and, ultimately, ironically contracting the effective democratic space. The way in which populism affects democracy, then, would depend on the context. Muddle and Kaltwasser examine this context by establishing two criteria; whether populists are in opposition or in power, and whether the democratic regime is consolidated or unconsolidated.¹⁸ They argue that populism within the opposition has only a minor impact on the quality of democracy since it has little room to maneuver, and it has the positive effect of giving a voice to groups with less representation. On the other hand, populism within the government brings about more negative effects. This threat is more serious for unconsolidated democracies, where checks and balances are not strongly institutionalized, compared to consolidated democracies where the intact separation of powers can check populist forces.

This paper examines the South Korean case with relation to these typologies, and argues that oppositional popular movements from below have strongly influenced democratic politics by serving the public interest of political reform. When government relies on populist demands for its legitimacy, however, it can harm democratic institutions and weaken governability in the end. Although South Korea is one of the few consolidated democracies in Asia, the separation of powers and horizontal accountability among the executive branch, the legislature, and the judiciary are not yet fully institutionalized. Nevertheless, the polarized political society in South Korea places every government under social scrutiny and thereby prevents populism at the top from developing into authoritarian rule. This unique nature of South Korea’s politics allows its populism to remain “tamed,” leaving no chance for populists to undermine democracy there.

The Case of South Korea

South Korean politics do not necessarily merit the label of populism *per se* if one employs a populist model based

¹⁷ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18-22.

¹⁸ Cas Mudde and Cristobal Rovira Kaltwasser, 2012. *Populism in Europe and the Americas: Threat or Corrective for Democracy?* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 18-22.

solely on the experiences of European or Latin American societies. There have been neither clear economic divides nor ethnic or other cultural divides that have led to explosive popular protests or movements. “Populism” has a negative connotation in South Korea, and is usually applied to irresponsible public policies which waste taxpayer money. Politicians often attack one another by charging that their position is populist. Although the government and political parties in South Korea certainly engage in populist redistributive politics, the degree to which they do so is not excessive. What is distinctive about South Korea is its vertical structure of political populism from both below and above. For the operational definition of populism in the Korean context, I will define populism as “politics expressing the popular will of the people both by the people and by the leaders.” South Korean populist politics can be led by people mobilized from below and they can also be maneuvered by the powerful. Since populism is used as a neutral term, its impact on the quality of Korean democracy differs depending on the situation.

South Korean populism from below is usually oppositional rather than supportive of the government. Past occasions when people were mobilized to retrieve power have led to the reversal of government decisions and even the impeachment of a president. Unlike the hypothesis of Mudde and Kaltwasser, populism within the opposition has been influential in changing politics in South Korea. The country’s development was guided by the meritocratic elite bureaucracy, but a plebiscitary transformation has been underway with democratization for some time. South Korea’s highly digitalized social environment has given its vocal citizens the power to mobilize public opinion. These days, political leaders must cultivate a direct link with the people to claim legitimacy.

Candlelight protests have emerged as a way to represent popular movements from below where people from all walks of life participate. They are voluntarily mobilized to express the will of the majority. While civil society organizations often play a core role in initiating and sustaining such protests, the success of candlelight protests depends on the mass participation of ordinary citizens. Public anger and moral indignation are powerful drivers which mobilize people into the streets. On the other hand, politicians can use populist tactics to strengthen their power over their opponents. This type of populism from the top aims to rationalize government decisions by claiming that the public supports them. I will call popular protests— or movements, if the protests are sustained over a longer span of time— “popular protests from below” and distinguish them from “populist politics from the top.” If popular protest movements usually reject ties with political parties or any appearance of partisanship in order to claim the genuine citizen virtue of caring for the public interest, populist politics by those in power essentially remain partisan. The latter type of populist politics is more toxic to Korean democracy, and has not helped citizen protest movements translate into institution building for good governance. The following section will discuss these different modes of popular movements and populist politics.

Popular Protests from Below

Like many other democracies, Korean society is also plagued by rising inequality. People are anxious and extremely sensitive to the perceived lack of social mobility. They also view their society as ridden with high levels of social conflict; between the rich and poor, employers and employees, conservatives and progressives, older and younger generations, men and women, and so on. There are growing populist attitudes among South Koreans as

they lose patience with their political system and become more prone to take to the streets to protest. Beetham argues there are three dimensions necessary to deem power as legitimate: conformity to rules that have legal validity, the presence of justifiable rules in terms of shared beliefs, and legitimation through expressed consent.¹⁹ Rules are upheld not just for their impartial application but also for their end result improving welfare and embodying social justice. In Korean society, the justifiability of rules is often challenged since many people believe that the rich and powerful can bend them as they please. This sense of injustice exists as the undercurrent of resentment against the hereditarily privileged class such as *chaebol* families. *Chaebols* are conglomerates controlled by a founding family and passed from one generation to another. These economically powerful conglomerates have repeatedly colluded with government and political leaders who have the regulatory power to influence their businesses.

Political parties in Korea have not effectively coalesced around these negative social undercurrents and developed good policies in response. Bröning points out that mainstream liberal and conservative parties in Europe alienated traditional supporters as they moved closer to the ideological center in the last decade, which made their disenchanted supporters easy targets for populists.²⁰ On the contrary, Korean political parties have been moving further towards ideological extremes rather than the center, resulting in a paralyzed legislature and the subsequent rise of public mistrust. Moreover, the voting system wherein the majority of legislative members are elected from a simple plurality has made the two major political parties, who easily win elections due to electoral rules, less attentive to public discontent. Dismissing their legislature as incompetent, people tend to run to the executive government directly to fix social problems. The legacy of the developmental state also makes South Koreans think that the executive portion of the government is responsible for and able to resolve most public issues. Therefore, popular demands are usually made directly to the president and his or her administration rather than to representatives in the National Assembly. Both at the central and the local level, major protests are usually undertaken with the aim of influencing government decisions.

Korean civil society has been very active in expressing the public will. Domestically, civic activism is praised as a healthy sign of participatory democracy.²¹ Citizens can use institutionalized channels created by public authorities when they try to insert their opinions into the policy making process. On the other hand, citizens can also employ the alternative measure of going out into the streets to make demands or just show their opposition to current policies. The latter method of “expressive politics” has been increasingly used since democratization occurred. Downtown street demonstrations and the resulting traffic jams have become ordinary weekend events on the streets near Seoul City Hall, *Gwanghwamun* plaza, and Seoul Station. According to the *Chosun Ilbo*, downtown Seoul is a “heaven for demonstrations” with thirty rallies every day. Police reported that there were 37,478 demonstrations between January and July of 2018, an increase of 58 percent compared to the

¹⁹ David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power*, 2nd ed. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)

²⁰ Michael Bröning, “The Rise of Populism in Europe: Can the Center Hold?,” *Foreign Affairs*, last modified June 3, 2016, <http://foreignaffairs.com/print/1117623>

²¹ Measuring participatory democracy can be controversial. The Varieties of Democracy Index ranked the participatory component of South Korea in 2016 lower than the other four components of electoral, liberal, deliberative, and egalitarian. This is because the criteria index uses direct populace votes (such as referendums and plebiscites) and the independence of local and regional government together with civil society participation (Anderson and Mechkova 2016) to evaluate participation. If expressive activities on the streets and in cyberspace were used, however, South Korea would be assessed to have a strong participatory component of its democracy.

previous year.²² Progressive governments, including the current Moon Jae-in administration, have taken a more liberal stance toward public demonstrations than conservatives. Some of these street protests have been peaceful while others have been violent, leading to physical clashes with police.

Several massive candlelight protests deserve particular attention to understand South Korean populism. Candlelight protests are distinguished from conventional demonstrations put on by labor unions, farmer associations, and other interest groups, although in theory these groups can employ the use of candles in their protests as well. Unbounded by special interest groups, candlelight protests are usually indicative of popular protests driven by public interest causes. While they draw the same thousands of people to the streets, some are more populist while others are more reflective. Three candlelight protests are examined here to see the different political contexts. Each of them has had a significant impact on South Korea's governance. If people in the first two cases were disapproving of specific government policies, people in the last candlelight protest movement discussed here rejected the existing system itself as unjust.

The SOFA Revision Candlelight Protests

Following the outbreak of the Korean War and subsequent influx of American soldiers, the Korean government signed a new wartime Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) that recognized the exclusive jurisdiction of the US Military Tribunal over crimes committed by US troops on Korean soil. This unequal SOFA was modified through a series of revisions in 1967, 1991, and 2001 in order to put South Korea and the US on more equal footing. While South Korea had jurisdiction over most crimes committed by American soldiers while off duty, crimes committed while on duty were handed over to the US military for adjudication.

On June 13 2002, two school girls were killed by a US armored mine-clearing vehicle driven by American soldiers on duty. After separate trials of the driver and commander of the armored vehicle, the soldiers were found not guilty on charges of negligent homicide. Following these rulings on November 20 and 23, mass rallies protesting their acquittals began immediately and lasted into the early months of 2003. The candlelight protests started with anger over the perceived injustice and evolved into a popular demand to revise SOFA to be more equal. These six-month candlelight protests can be considered the first case of the current South Korean model of popular protest.²³ Many believe that the previous months of massive street cheering for the Korean national team that reached the semi-finals in the 2002 World Cup games created a sort of collective mentality. The protests intertwined with the presidential election campaign as people demanded the US concede jurisdiction of on-duty crimes to South Korean authorities.

This round of candlelight protests was quelled in December 2002 after American President George W. Bush apologized and negotiated a shortening of the timeline to release charged American GIs to Korean authorities. Concerned with rising anti-American sentiment in South Korea, President George W. Bush made three apologies, two of which were indirect via the US Ambassador to South Korea Thomas Hubbard and the State

²² Eun Jeung Kim, "The entire nation in protest...counterattack of the masses, or the era of mob rule?," *Chosun Ilbo*, August 18 2018. Accessed June 25, 2019 http://news.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2018/08/17/2018081701710.html

²³ Sook Jong Lee, "The Rise of Korean Youth as a Political Force: Implications for the US-Korea Alliance." In Richard C. Bush et al. eds. *Brookings Northeast Asia Survey 2003-2004*. Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, Brookings Institution. (2004): pp. 15-30.

Department Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage, and the third directly via a telephone call to Korean President Kim Dae-jung. The “powerful” US government’s protection of American soldiers against the young victims of a “weaker” South Korea led to a public perception that South Korea’s national sovereignty had been encroached upon. This case can be characterized as populism mixed with nationalism where the outsider was a powerful foreign country. The bottom-up popular movement was between the Korean people and the US government, while the Korean government was in the difficult position of having to manage its relations with both. The anti-American protests of 2002 took the US government by surprise, and they spurred the US Forces in Korea (USFK) to emphasize outreach efforts to local communities near its military bases.

The Mad Cow Disease Candlelight Protests

The so-called “mad cow disease²⁴ candlelight protests” bear more populist features than the SOFA protests described above. On April 18 2008, the Lee Myung-bak government struck a deal with the US to lower the inspection criteria for imported American beef. It was agreed that nearly all parts of American beef from cows aged less than thirty months would be imported without inspections, while the import of specified risky portions of beef from cows aged thirty months and over would be inspected. Students, mothers with young babies, consumers, and people from all walks of life took to the streets to voice their opposition to this decision. Candlelight protests continued for more than two months, subdued only after the government renegotiated the beef import deal with the American government, and the presidential aids in the Blue House were reshuffled after taking the blame for the unpopular policy. The media report broadcast by MBC on the program “PD Diary,” which discussed the potential dangers of American cows with this disease, contributed to the ignition of public fear. Rumors and unscientific claims went viral. Public officials and some doctors tried to assuage the baseless fears of the public, but were no match for those who believed the fake news.

Angry protestors attacked the Lee administration for compromising public health in order to speed up a free trade deal with the US. Conservative commentators maintained that the whole event was manipulated by leftists who could not accept the win of conservative President Lee in the previous year’s election. Protestors clashed with police when they tried to march toward the Blue House. This time, the candlelight protests that had started peacefully turned into violent riots and left a controversy over who was more responsible for the ugly confrontations. Later in 2011, the Supreme Court ruled that MBC had to make an apology for airing fake news, but the producers who made the program were firmly opposed to the broadcasting company making any sort of apology.

This case is structured between the potential consumer victims and the elite technocrats inside the government. It was a clash between the masses and elites where an import policy transformed into a public health issue. The whole episode remains populist and played out in terms of domestic politics.

²⁴Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

The Choi Soon-sil Gate and Park Impeachment Candlelight Protests

The so-called Choi Soon-sil Gate was unique compared to other South Korean government corruption cases in the past. Its impact was huge, leading to the unprecedented impeachment of incumbent President Park Geun-hye. The candlelight protests lasted from October of 2016 to March 2017, which drew the biggest number of people onto the streets. The protests were able to avoid descending into violence despite their massive scale and long duration. The story began in late July 2016 when *TV Chosun* reported suspicious Blue House involvement in the raising of funds to establish the Mir and K Sports Foundations. It was *Hankyoreh* News that revealed Choi Soon-sil as President Park's close confidante and exposed her involvement in the fundraising process for these two foundations. The report quickly drew public attention to this previously unknown woman, which exploded as media outlets competed to bring to light stories about the relationship between Choi and President Park. Whether the stories were true or not, a significant number of people who used to support Park began to turn their backs on her. How could Choi, a private citizen, intervene in government affairs using her close ties with the aloof President? The very idea was enough to anger the public. When it was exposed that Choi had used her money to gain admission for her daughter to a prestigious university, Choi became the embodiment of the corrupt rich in the public eye. Cable TV outlet JTBC reported on October 24 that they had discovered Choi's tablet PC, which became the smoking gun of her involvement in the fundraising scandal. This prompted people to hold candles on streets in an expression of their anger over the injustice. The first protest on October 29 drew several thousand people, and later protests grew to a crowd of more than one million. One estimate stated that about sixteen million people participated in the twenty total candlelight protests. The protests soon developed into a movement calling for Park's impeachment. Faced with this popular pressure, the legislature voted to impeach on December 9, 2016, a parliamentary decision that was upheld by the Constitutional Court on March 10, 2017. Progressive civil society organizations and labor unions provided leadership, but spontaneous grassroots participation was the key to sustaining the peaceful popular protests.

The candlelight protests of 2016 started with public outcry over the illegitimate involvement of Choi in public affairs and evolved into the impeachment movement. Naturally, opposition party leaders, including the current President Moon and other progressive leaders, participated in the rallies. However, the candlelight movement remained a festive expression of civil society activism without being tied to any particular political party. This time, the candlelight protests defied the negative characteristics of populism in the following ways. First, people were aware of the limited role of mass rallies as a channel to show the public will, and retained the belief that official decisions should be made by both the legislature and the courts, which are pivotal democratic institutions. Simply put, popular passion was tamed by the respect for constitutional order. People restrained their behavior to keep the protests peaceful. Second, personal attacks and moralistic accusations were integrated into more constructive discourses about how to restore justice and reform the nation. In doing so, people felt connected as members of the republic. The massive rallies unified rather than divided civil society, although a small number of Park loyalists revolted against the majority and still do so even today. Third, the impeachment protests left a positive impact, especially upon younger Koreans. Today's Korean youth in their twenties and early thirties suffer from underemployment and unemployment and are not well represented in the world of politics. The successful

candlelight impeachment movement enhanced their feelings of political efficacy and invited ongoing minority activism, with the #MeToo movement as one such example.

Outsider assessments did not always agree with this characterization. For example, Max Fisher, a reporter with the *New York Times*, compared the Korean impeachment movement with the French populist movement, pointing out that the Korean movement embraced institutions and sought to bridge social divides.²⁵ On the other hand, Nilsson-Wright characterized the late 2016 impeachment movement as populist, writing that Park Geun-hye “has been denied natural justice and the presumption of innocence until proven guilty.”²⁶ This was written when the team headed by Special Prosecutor Park Young-soo had started a three-month investigation into the Park and Choi scandal. Nilsson-Wright argued that this movement reflected the long shadow of identity politics and unresolved disagreements about the achievements of Park Geun-hye’s father, the late President Park Chung-hee, and the country’s other postwar historical narrative. This assessment holds some truth since the anti-impeachment rallies, dubbed “*Taekeukki* (national flag)” rallies, were largely filled with older people who took pride in the country’s successful modernization under Park Chung-hee. At the same time, one should note that this social divide did not accompany the typical populist tendency of each group labelling the other as illegitimate. Rather, both groups called themselves patriotic nationalists and the essence of their social divide was whether the existing system should be honored or needed radical transformation.

Populist Politics from the Top

The Politics of Eradicating “Accumulated Evils”

The current Moon Jae-in administration was launched in May 2017 after presidential elections were held seven months early following the impeachment of former President Park. After winning the election as an extension of the reform-driven candlelight movement, the Moon administration launched a political drive to eradicate the wrongdoings of previous governments. Dubbing them “accumulated evils,” public investigations were launched into a number of cases involving former high-ranking public officials. A series of prosecutorial investigations have been widely criticized by conservative media as political reprisals, while progressive outlets have praised them as long overdue. Following her impeachment, Park was imprisoned on March 31, 2017, and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison and a fine of twenty billion KRW (approximately eighteen million USD) by the higher court on August 24, 2018. The majority of the public did not view the ruling as unfair, although legal controversy has remained over the bribery of a third party, i.e., Choi, by conglomerates under Park’s influence. The drive to “root out accumulated evils” also reopened the bribery case of another former president. On September 6, 2017, the court sentenced former President Lee Myung-bak to twenty years in prison and a fine of fifteen billion KRW (approximately fourteen million USD) for taking bribes, taking money from a company he had denied ownership of, and other similar crimes. He was imprisoned on March 24 2018 and released shortly thereafter on bail. The

²⁵ Max Fisher. “When a Political Movement is Populist, or Isn’t.” *New York Times*, May 10, 2017.

²⁶ John Nilsson-Wright, “Populism Comes to South Korea.” Chatham House, December 20, 2016. Accessed on June 25, 2019 from <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/populism-comes-south-korea>

unfortunate imprisonments did not stop with these two presidents. Former public officials who had been involved in several controversial policies were also investigated and charged. Some deserved this, but others did not.

From the fall of 2018, the drive to eradicate “accumulated evils” went to the judicial body. An investigation of former Supreme Court judges and the top officials of the Office of Court Administration was launched. It was alleged that judges who belonged to the court administration under former Supreme Court Chief Justice Yang Seung-tae had discussed trials with government officials working under President Park Geun-hye and had conveyed their opinions to trial judges. After warrants for the arrests of the judges involved were dismissed several times, two Supreme Court judges were jailed. The judiciary was divided. For the first time in the history of the South Korean constitution, judges representing courts across the nation announced on November 21 that impeachment needs to be considered for judges alleged to have abused their authority during the tenure of former President Park Geun-hye. The prosecutor’s office started investigating Chief Justice Yang on January 11 2019, indicting him on the eighteenth. It was the first time in Korean history that a Supreme Court Chief Justice was charged and indicted. He was imprisoned and trials are ongoing as of April 2019. The whole episode undermined the authority of courts that used to have more trust than legislature and government. Prosecutors were often criticized for being tied to Blue House in the past. But this is first time that the courts have been charged with illicit political dealings.

Corruption needs to be rooted out. But demonizing former public officials and weakening the authority of the Supreme Court is neither a fair nor reasonable method. Outsiders have also observed that the vilification and demonization of political opponents under the “accumulated evils” reform wave is harming functional democracy.²⁷ If accumulated evils are to be effectively rooted out, the country needs to embark on institutional reforms rather than simply focusing on persecuting former officials. Korean politics is riddled with this negative cycle of populist correction driven by new power which is followed by the same populist revenge after the loss of power. The correction drive is usually pushed during the first two years of a new presidency, losing momentum as presidential power declines under the single-term presidency system. People cheer the initial correction drive but lose interest in favor of more pragmatic economic matters. The worst form of political correction is for a new government to interfere in ideologically divisive issues such as the official interpretation of modern history. When the governing system is repeatedly subject to corrective measures after power is handed over to a new administration, this discredits institutions. If the correction drive attempted by both progressive and conservative governments has been viewed as a way of gaining political advantage, it will only serve to intensify the divisions in Korean political society. A system prone to power abuse and corruption can be fixed only through bipartisan consensus for more transparent and accountable institutional reform.

Conclusion

In this paper, I argue that it is difficult to categorize South Korean politics as the type of populism typically found in Latin America or Europe. There have been no signs of charismatic populist leaders or parties. There is no such

²⁷ Rowan, Bernard, “Of Accumulated Evils and Foolishness.” *The Korea Times*, January 16, 2018. Accessed June 20, 2019 from https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/opinion/2018/01/625_242467.html

conspicuous horizontal populism wherein the majority rules over the minority within society. Radical rightists and leftists alike treat each other as enemies, and achieving political compromise between them is nearly impossible. Nevertheless, this chasm does not form a horizontal structure of populism since both groups are part of mainstream society. On the other hand, South Korea shares the essential element of anti-elite populism where the decisions of the plebiscite have more legitimacy than decisions made by the elite, and political discourse is centered on moral debates of right and wrong. Major public decisions need to be legitimized by popular support, which causes political leaders to seek more direct ties and emotional rapport with their supporters. Korean populism is primarily vertical, flowing in both directions between the government and the people.

South Korea's vertical populism has been enacted by ordinary people who opposed incumbent presidents and administrations for failing to adequately respond to issues of social justice or national sovereignty. Korean society shares the symptoms of public anxiety and discontent, largely resulting from economic difficulties and rising inequality. But these economic factors remain in the background and are unable to mobilize the masses on their own. Most of the issues that have sparked protests have been primarily political, ranging from a corruption scandal to seemingly illegitimate policy decisions as shown in the several cases illustrated here. This oppositional form of popular protest from below has had a great impact compared to the oppositional protests of other countries. Government policies have changed and a president was impeached. Some of these popular protests resembled fear-driven irrational populism, but most cases addressed problems of democratic deficit. Therefore, one can argue that the popular protests of South Korea have served the positive function of correcting flaws of Korean democracy. At the same time, incumbent power can mobilize public support to carry out a political campaign, which is populism from the top. Those in power have continually exploited the popularity of persecuting corrupt politicians and officials, often compromising due process and levying judgements via the court of public opinion. With this pattern repeated after each administration change, populist correction drives have discredited public institutions and so undermined the ability of any administration to govern effectively. This type of populist politics from power is a threat to high-quality democracy based on collaborative governance. Nevertheless, the intense competition for power to win the next election serves as an antidote against the emergence of the authoritarian type of populism that is a real threat to democracy. With these features, the vertical populism of South Korea can be characterized as "tamed populism" with more positive than negative results.

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