

contrary, the governments who proclaimed democratic credentials were, in practice, too generous in the compromises they struck with ‘status quo-oriented’ elements. The normalization of politics and the accommodation of pluralistic competition was repeatedly delayed, and the extant conservative political representation thrived in the resultant vacuum, fuelling region-based factionalism and socio-cultural regionalism in the process. In effect, the growth of democracy in Korea was suspended, and the establishment of a vicious cycle of crises of participation and crises of representation became inevitable. As long as the conservative-dominated party system remained intact, it manifested its discrepancies in proportion to the acceleration of class differentiation, restoration of progressive political forces, and rapid growth of civil society, including intensified social conflict. The political representation neither reflected adequately the new economic realities nor the new social and class divisions in society and, therefore, failed to mediate in the clash of competing interests or demands. In other words, it became obvious that political conservatism, sustained and fostered by the transformative rearrangement of state power, was causing ‘political lag’, and constituted a bottle-neck in the general developmental path of Korean society. The political system was increasingly seen as a cartel which excluded elements deserving of inclusion, and one that was patently incapable of effectively representing civil society.

B. Differentiation and Development of the Democratization Movement

In the third, previously suppressed, period of democratization various aspects of social activism increased as the ‘legal space’ expanded as a result of changes brought about by the June Struggle; at the same time, movements for political



A press conference by the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy.

democratization continued. The third period is divided into two sub-periods in the early 1990s; until which time the radical pro-democracy movement continued to play a central role in movement politics. Composed mainly of workers, farmers,

students, and radical intellectuals and a newly reactivated reunification movement promoting information sharing on North Korea, civic exchanges, joint inter-Korean gatherings, etc. A new social movement emerged in this period in the form of a 'civil movement', but it did not have a great impact in the early stages.

Two salient features characterized the first part of the third period of democratization. Firstly, the pro-democracy movements, which had thus far converged into one in the fight against dictatorship, divided into two. On the one side there were liberal forces whose main interest was to democratize political institutions, while on the other there were radical elements promoting socio-economic democratization, producer democracy, and democratization of international relations. Secondly, the social movements consisting of grassroots people such as workers and farmers became central to the radical movement politics, reinforcing the more traditional student and intellectual groups.

In the second sub-period, from the early 1990s to the present time, several changes have taken place within the democratization movement. As political democratization progressed over time, pro-democracy activism focussing on

anti-dictatorship became weaker, as did the so-called 'all-out people's resistance' line. Other efforts to democratize the economic base also underwent significant changes. In one regard, the collapse of European socialist states and the global rise of neo-liberal capitalism so had a wider effect on Korean society that it became more conservative, and, in the process, put the radical intellectual movement in crisis and disarray. In another regard, the class-based mass movement progressed rapidly; most notably with the formation of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a labor organization that was to become a leading actor in the democratization movement.

A key feature of this period is that the post-democracy agenda, previously ignored and marginalized, assumed greater prominence, triggering various post-democracy social movements. Wider socio-political discourses waned due to the effects of the progress of democratization in state power as well as that of the collapse of the socialist bloc. Diverse citizens' movements emerged in the space created and took up issues such as environmental degradation, gender discrimination, homosexuality, and minority interests, etc.

There was also an important shift in the cast of main actors in the democratization movement, with the most notable changes being the decline of the student movement and its replacement by the civil movement and class-based mass movement. The civil movement played a leading role in the areas of political and post-democratization issues, while the class-based movement or people's movement was most influential in issues surrounding socio-economic and producer-oriented democracy and the democratization of foreign policy. Through continuing struggle and political awareness, the labor movement in particular became the base for the establishment of independent, progressive political parties, the People's Victory

21 Party and the Democratic Labor Party.

The ‘May Struggle of 1991’ was a 60-day, nation-wide, popular protest against the Roh Tae-woo government which began on April 26 when a demonstrating university student, Gang Gyeong-dae was beaten to death by riot police. It ended on June 29 when the protest headquarters personnel retreated from their operations base, Myong-dong Catholic Cathedral, in downtown Seoul. The demonstrations involved more than a million people and included 2,361 protest rallies around the country; all beneath the slogan ‘Dissolve Minja Dang¹⁴, Dismiss Roh Tae-woo’. The lives of 13 young protesters were lost, 11 of whom burned themselves to death. In all, it was the most serious popular protest to occur during the period of the Sixth Republic, and it drove the Roh government into great crisis.

The May Struggle was an inevitable consequence of Roh Tae-woo’s so-called ‘security rule’, which was enforced as a set of highly repressive measures involving the mobilization of terror against those who were deemed a threat to public order, and the purpose of which was to sustain Roh’s grip on power. In addition, public reaction to various irregular activities of the government converged in the May Struggle; activities such as the merging of three political parties¹⁵, an attempted constitutional revision towards a parliamentary cabinet system, an increase in staple commodity prices, housing shortages, the threat to the livelihoods of ordinary people brought about by comprehensive import-liberalization, and a series of political corruption scandals.

However, the anticipated ‘June Struggle’ did not occur, in spite of several deaths and the fact that the democratization movement had made plans for it. This constituted a success for

14 Roh Tae-woo’s Democratic Liberal Party, the party in power at the time.

15 The minority ruling party recreated itself as a majority party by merging with two of the three opposition parties in a secret deal which isolated Kim Dae-jung’s party.



Environmental organizations denouncing the Government for its anti-environmental policies.

the ruling elite's efforts to minimize or reverse the 'revolutionary' trend towards democratization, and was the first setback to the popular, all-out, struggle against the government. It left a painful legacy and a sense of defeat in the collective memory of all those who had taken to

the streets in May 1991.

It was also a disaster from the democratization movement perspective because the dominant discourse of the movement was one of death and violence, especially in relation to those who had perished in the struggles against military rule. The discourse was both a source both of upheaval and the cause of a reduction in the effectiveness of the protest. During the short period of 60 days other voices were raised, stressing the basic rights to livelihood of the grassroots populace and attempting to generate discussion of an alternative system. These other elements could not replace the main discourse ingredients of death and violence, however. In sum, while the importance of the deaths of protestors, and the huge public sympathy they generated, could never be denied, concentration upon them precluded positive progress being achieved by those who continued to fight against the authority. Their efforts eventually exhausted the public as well as the activists themselves.

(i) Growth of the citizens' and class-based mass movements

Since the beginning of the transition to democracy in 1987, Korean society saw the previously singular dichotomy of democracy versus non-democracy gradually becoming blurred, and being replaced by new conflicts and divisions that were more diverse, multi-layered, and multi-polar in nature. This led inevitably to a diversification of the democratization movement. Most notably, two distinct camps, usually identified as 'citizens' movement' and 'the people's movement', emerged from what had been a unified entity. The rise of these two competing camps within the democratic cause constituted a new trend, where 'centrifugal differentiation' coexisted with the former 'centripetal deepening'. It also presented a new phenomenon of 'hegemonic competition' between social movements which had, until then, coexisted in a single frame of solidarity. Both camps shared much in their prospectuses for the actual reform of state power, but differed in the direction of the final reform, opting for either liberalist normalization or a progressive transformation. They differed particularly sharply on the agenda of economic liberalization, the impact of globalization, and the independent political formation of popular forces.

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A civil movement, or the movement politics of citizenship, had hardly existed before 1987, but expanded its scope enormously in the early years of the 1990s. The reason for this is to be located in the nature of the liberal social movement within the old pro-democracy movement, that developed into diverse forms of civil movement in the space created by the events of 1987. According to the Civic Organizations Almanac 2000, Korea had 4,023 non-governmental organizations (NGO's), or more than 20,000 if branch organizations are included. In the process of accelerating growth, the initial groups showed conservative characteristics:



Organizing the National Trade Unions Conference, (1990)

epitomized by the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice established in 1989. Later in the 1990s, however, civil society grew with the expansion of human rights NGOs and the formation of progressive civic groups such as the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (1994) and the

Korea Federation of Environmental Movements (1993).

The civil movement often assumed the role of 'watch-dog' over the institutional reform of politics, as the phenomenon of the political lag mentioned earlier persisted. This created a new phenomenon of 'proxy representation'. Civic power-monitoring ranged from election-monitoring to parliamentary scrutiny activities, and from legislative appeal campaigns to 'blacklist' campaigns in general elections. The successful blacklist campaign in 2000, when various NGOs formed a national coalition and produced a list of 'unfit' candidates to put pressure on political parties and convince the electorate of the validity of the election, became a model of civic-initiated political reform and was later referred to favourably in Japan and other countries.

The peoples' movement representing the progressive section of the pro-democracy movement also advanced in terms of organizational strength and political influence, taking advantage of the more democratic social conditions created since 1987. Many organizations moved their activities from what had been an illegal or semi-legal arena into the newly expanded legal space. The most conspicuous progress appeared in the

labor movement. As anticipated by the July–September Workers’ Struggle, the labor movement saw a huge growth in mass–based trade unionism and succeeded in establishing national trade union centres such as Jeon–no–hyeop¹⁶(January 1990) and Minjoo–Nochong¹⁷(November 1995). The general strikes of 1996~1997, which lasted more than a month and in which several million unionists participated, were possible because of the magnitude of the popular base of democratic trade unionism and the strength of support of civic groups. This historic industrial action, as was noted by democratic and progressive forces around the world, was not only the workers defending their basic rights against the surprise passage through the National Assembly of a revision of labor laws in 1996, but also an expression of their resolve to fight the dehumanizing impact of neo–liberal globalization. It also happened in the context of a labor movement which was becoming more central in a wider popular movement in Korea.

In addition, farmers’, teachers’, the urban poor and other movements were also making significant organizational and political progress. Front organizations, such as the National Association for National and Democratic Movements (January 1989), the National Association for Democracy and National Reunification (December 1991), and the National Alliance of People (March 2001) were formed to set and promote national agendas and raise issues concerning democratic reforms.

These developments also led a change in the internal composition of the people’s movement itself. For example, organizational and mass–movement aspects have increased since 1987 whereas intelligentsia and individual aspects, which predominated before 1987, have decreased. Diminished also is

16 Korean Council of Trade Unions (KCTU).

17 Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, restructured and expanded from the former KCTU by the addition of newly formed industrial unions.

the significance of the student movement and other intellectual movements in front or alliance organizations, their places having been yielded to labor and other class-based mass movements.

At the same time, this period saw an increase in pro-democracy activism among members of the law, media, and medical professions and academics, as well as an increase of small, local, grassroots groups in new issue areas. In particular, a nation-wide popular protest was recently launched as both an anti-US, independence movement and an anti-war movement. It was initially triggered by an incident in which a US military vehicle crushed two young Korean girls to death, and later reinforced by the contentious issue of the dispatch of Korean troops to Iraq.

(ii) Advance of independent, progressive political formations

The main outcomes of the conservatives' rearrangement of the system of ruling during the transitional period were lagging reforms and crippled management of state affairs in institutional politics. The political exclusion of workers and the general population continued in a party system dominated by elite cartels and conservative monopolies. In addition, the experience of the 1987 presidential election and 1988 general election gave substantial legitimacy to the practice of public elections as a general principle of political competition, effectively sidelining or even excluding other forms of political representation. In other words, a 'reduction of politics' took place as the value that had previously been accorded to 'street politics' was reoriented toward electoral institutions.

It was in this context that worker and other popular movements advanced legal, progressive political parties in an attempt to establish an independent, progressive political formation. However, such efforts were doomed to failure from



The Democratic Labor Party members commemorating the results of the 17th general election.

the outset, mainly due to marginal participation and support from mass movements, especially in the cases of the People's Party (1988) and the Unified People's Party (1992). A new impetus was created by the workers general strikes of 1996~97, when participating groups came to a firm consensus

on the urgent need for a political organization representing the working class and its activism. This common awareness led to the formation of the People's Victory Party 21 (1997) and the Democratic Labor Party (2000) which, in turn, opened a new era of 'one million votes for progressive politics' in the 2002 presidential election. This constituted the first recognition of political citizenship of progressive forces. Later, in the general election in 2004, the Democratic Labor Party succeeded in getting ten candidates elected to the National Assembly.



Workers requesting the elimination of discrimination against.