South Korea's Progressive Turn

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South Korea's
President Moon Jae-in.
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The South Korean government is responding more and more to concerns about inequality, diversity, quality of life, and the environment, an historical shift for a state that has long given priority to business interests. In this essay, Erik Mobrand argues that this change is rooted not only in the rotation of parties in office, but more deeply in the Candlelight Movement of 2016 and 2017 and the recent thaw in relations between North Korea and the United States.

Two years have passed since disgraced former President Park Geun-hye was dismissed and President Moon Jae-in took office in Seoul. While South Korea's newspapers remain filled with accounts of acrimonious encounters between opposing blocs of legislators and their supporters, a profound shift has occurred in the political order. For just about the first time in the country's history, the state has been prodded in a progressive direction. The shift has been turbulent and involved false starts, dead ends, and unfortunate compromises, but it remains nonetheless substantial. It would be incorrect to attribute the progressive turn solely to the party in power. The Moon administration has been indispensable for this turn but far more has occurred than simply a switch in office

from one party to another. Rather, a deeper set of forces is at work. Two developments have been especially significant.

The first development is the Candlelight Movement of 2016–17, in which millions of Koreans peacefully took to the streets demanding Park's resignation, expressing frustration over unearned privilege and unjust inequality. The Movement also demonstrated the power of citizen participation (Kim 2017), and helped propel Moon, a former human rights lawyer, to the presidency. More than that, though, the Movement forced issues of inequality and obstacles to social mobility to the top of the agenda, so that anyone who took office would need to make these problems their priorities. Moon and his ruling Democratic Party have thus been pushed in a more progressive direction than is necessarily expected from a party that has not always distinguished itself with the promise of social and economic justice. In other words, the constituency for the ruling party shifted in 2017.

The second development can be found in the thaw in relations between Pyongyang and Washington. In South Korea, the stance of the United States on North Korea is not a matter that belongs in some separate realm of foreign relations—it cuts to the heart of the domestic political order. The United States' traditionally hawkish stance empowers illiberal figures in South Korea, justifying suspicion of progressive forces and heavy-handed treatment of labour advocates. Donald Trump, by meeting with Chairman Kim Jong-un, has been the unlikely—and surely inadvertent—bearer of a message that weakens illiberal forces south of the Demilitarised Zone (DMZ). The argument that insecurity justifies limits on pluralism becomes all the less compelling when South Koreans see an American president meeting with the North Korean leader. With anticommunism weakened as a pretext for attacking progressive moves, South Korea has been able to shift course.

Progressive Legislation and Court Decisions

This shift is related to particular social and economic concerns. Work-life balance and feminism have emerged as buzzwords over the past two years. These concerns have gained new forms of articulation in the political system. Despite holding only six seats in the 300-member National Assembly, the labour-oriented Justice Party has played a significant role in driving the progressive agenda. In doing so, the Justice Party emerged as a standard bearer of the calls from the Candlelight Movement for creating a fairer society.

Several initiatives have grown out of these concerns. The government in 2018 raised the minimum wage by over 10 percent. A further increase was debated but eventually dropped. In the same year, legislation reduced the maximum hours an employee can work. South Koreans work some of the longest hours in the OECD, leaving little time for family and leisure. After the new law came into effect, employees can work no more than 52 hours per week—hardly a low figure for an industrialised economy, but a reduction from the previous 68 hours. Managers resisted the shift, and the main media groups attacked the policy for reducing the country's competitiveness. Arguably, though, inefficient managerial styles are to blame for the relatively low level of labour productivity, and the new policy can incentivise managers to increase efficiency. Surveys show that employees have gained substantial amounts of free time since the law went into effect—nearly an hour per day in one study of office workers (Lee 2018). The cultural shifts that may follow could be significant.

In the same year, gender relations gained widespread attention, in part because the global #MeToo movement reached Korean shores. Protesters staged events to demand better treatment of women in a country where they face barriers to finding work and managers treat family life as an alternative to

a working career for a woman. Government responsiveness to this could be seen in a landmark court ruling. In April 2019, the Constitutional Court ruled that the country's ban on abortion is unconstitutional. Abortion has been illegal since early in the Republic's history, though the ban has rarely been enforced and abortion remains a common practice. The Court's decision, which does not immediately annul the law, is a move toward bringing law more closely into line with practice and is a significant symbolic statement.

These changes have not lived up to everyone's hopes and some progressive moves have even been rolled back. Lee Jae-yong, the de facto Samsung boss, was sentenced to five years in prison for corruption but released only months later. Nonetheless, these recent developments should be viewed against two decades of persistent neoliberalisation. Even the progressive President Roh Moo-hyun (2003–08), for whom President Moon served as chief of staff, could not derail the neoliberal trajectory. Despite Roh's plans to expand regulation in several areas, his tenure became the golden era of free trade agreements and informalisation of labour continued apace (Armstrong 2008). The experiences of the Roh administration underscore that the current shifts cut deeper than who occupies the presidency.

Electoral Reform

The Moon government has put revision of the political system on the agenda as well. The aim has been to make government more responsive to a wider range of interests, while also enhancing checks on powerful offices. One effort was constitutional reform, and the Moon administration pushed for this soon after taking office. However, again, this initiative cannot be attributed solely to Moon. In January 2017, months before his election,

legislators considered possible amendments to the constitution to prevent something like the Park scandal from recurring.

While constitutional revision has been hampered a reform of the electoral system has made greater progress. Expanding the principle of proportionality in representation was made a priority in the wake of the Candlelight Movement. The concern was that the current system gives insufficient voice to the variety of interests in society. Minorities of all sorts are, in this view, poorly served under the existing institutional design. South Korea has a mixed electoral system for its single-house legislature. Most seats are allocated through single-member districts with the remainder given to party list candidates. The majoritarian rules for single-member districts have contributed to a situation where the largest parties perform disproportionately well. Parties suffer if they gain support widely across the country, but only among a minority of voters in each district. The reform bill expands the proportional representation component of the electoral system. The ruling Democratic Party joined forces with the Justice Party and a third party of legislators who had traditionally been in the Democratic Party. While the bill has not yet passed, it has sufficient support and has been 'fast tracked' toward passage this year.

The reform bill is a positive move, and it is accompanied by a proposal to expand oversight and to weaken prosecutorial authority in a context where prosecutors have been perceived as unhealthily close to big business. What is most promising—and a departure from the past—is that parties have been willing to take a calculated risk in proposing electoral reform. Previous reforms to the electoral system and to election-related laws have largely moved in the opposite direction, toward minimising the uncertainty of elections for the major parties. Those reforms came from agreement between the largest political parties, meeting usually with frustration from the Justice Party or its predecessors (Mobrand 2019). This time, the

Democratic Party has worked with the Justice Party and not with the main opposition Liberal Korea Party. There is uncertainty over who will gain most under the revised electoral rules. Presumably, a minor progressive party like the Justice Party will do well; it already gets most of its seats through proportional representation. However, the Democratic Party could push in a progressive direction and encroach on Justice Party space. In any case, when politicians take these risks that possibly undermine the influence of their own parties, citizens are the main beneficiaries.

Remaking the State

The shift in South Korea is not primarily the result of a simple rotation of parties in office. A progressive administration can take power without successfully implementing its plans. The challenge to a progressive agenda is profound. The South Korean state has strengths in security operations, overseeing construction projects, and supporting a range of business activities. The state can be used to facilitate mind-bogglingly ambitious land reclamation projects and the world's largest sea wall, both at enormous environmental costs. But it is not a state that can protect people from the effects of markets and business activities with ease, whether it be in labour regulation or in controlling energy production in a way that reduces air pollution. Metaphors of South Korea as a 'strong state' overlook these difficulties. Progressive forces, including at times the current administration, aim for these shifts but doing so requires pushing the state to operate in new ways. This politics is not simply about electoral change but also involves popular forces smashing up against the state to make it do things it has not done in the past.

The pushback against the progressive turn is all too visible. The opposition and the main media groups continue to claim that social

legislation and electoral reform push the country toward 'socialism' and that Moon is embarking on the construction of a 'left-wing ideological dictatorship' (Lee and Kim 2019). Conservative opposition legislators have—most ironically—appropriated the tactics and styles of the opposition under authoritarianism. They accuse the government of undermining democracy, they use their bodies to obstruct parliamentary processes, and they stage street demonstrations. They gain support from activists who call on the release of Park Geun-hye, a president convicted of abusing her authority and who deliberately did not respond for seven hours when the ferry MV Sewol began to sink with hundreds of students on board. The largest media organisations join the conservative opposition by accusing the ruling party of being undemocratic for not negotiating with the opposition.

At this moment, South Korea is rebuilding its political institutions. Passing legislation with majorities is part of that process, even when criticised by the opposition. Labelling normal legislative behaviour as undemocratic is nothing less than an effort to obstruct this rebuilding process. Prominent intellectual Paik Nak-chung (2018) goes so far as to argue that the Candlelight Movement was a constitutional moment—by bringing people out to restore the constitution after its violation by a president, the Movement put a social force behind the constitution. As the political scientist Jang Jip-choi notes (2012, 44–48), the constitution was formed in an exclusive and foreign-influenced process, and never really reflected the concerns of a substantial section of society. The Candlelight Movement and the thaw in US–DPRK relations—an internal push for accountability and a release of the pressure insisting on security before pluralism—both work to give ordinary people more space in politics. The result has been an impressive and historic fight to take the country in a progressive direction. ■