Betraying Democratization?: Media Narratives, Mass Protest and Presidential Impeachment in South Korea

KIMURA Kan *

Abstract

Following South Korea's democratization in 1987, Park Geun-hye's administration was one of the most popular in the country's modern political history. The government's sudden collapse in 2016 thus took many by surprise. Explaining this development, South Korea's media has focused on the pivotal role played by mass demonstrations. In this narrative, the anti-Park protest movement exerted strong pressure on the president, the ruling party and the political opposition. The latter was initially reluctant to call for impeachment, as Park's opponents were unprepared for an early presidential election. In light of mass demonstrations, the political parties changed course and initiated impeachment in the National Diet. This article explores the background resulting in the formation of the anti-Park mass protest. I summon available statistical evidence to illustrate the performance of South Korean society and mass media. Highlighting the limits of this data, I explore the demonstrators' discourse and locate the formation of the anti-Park protest in the international context to offer an alternative explanation for this recent case of government collapse. In sum, this article illustrates that the South Korean case is typical for countries that democratized in the third wave during the 1970s and 1980s.

* Professor, Graduate School of International Cooperation Studies, Kobe University.

1. Introduction

The eruption of mass protest, government collapse and eventual impeachment of South Korea's President Park Geun-hye in 2016-2017 surprised domestic and international observers alike. Since South Korea's democratization in the 1980s, President Park Geun-hye's administration became one of the most popular governments in the country's political history. In the third quarter of that year, President Park's approval rating was 32%, the third highest rating ever reported for any president in the fourth year of their term in office (Gallup Korea, 2016). At that time, many in the media expected Park to enjoy comparatively high support rates until the end of her term in 2018 (Kwon Y., 2015). However, public support shifted in late 2016 when the political scandal involving Park's "close friend" Choi Soon-sil (ABC News, 2017) was revealed in October. According to media reports, charges brought against Choi included the abuse of power, interference in state affairs and the illegal accumulation of $26 million (Associated Press, 2017). In light of this scandal and with 16 months left in office, Park's prospects for remaining in power as a highly popular government were immediately shattered. Joined by hundreds of thousands of protesters who gathered every Saturday night, massive demonstrations demanding the president's resignation were staged in the city center of Seoul. The demonstrations quickly spread to other cities, and more than a million people participated in similar mass protests all over the country (Kim T. & Lee Y., 2016). The demonstrations continued until the Constitutional Court of Korea ruled that the president should resign as of March 2017. In order to address public concerns over the political abuse of the impeachment process, South Korea's constitution authorizes the constitutional court to review the lawfulness of an impeachment vote by the National Diet.

As the scandal unfolded, Park's support base was severely damaged and her approval ratings plunged to 4% by November 2016 (The Guardian, 2016). It was the lowest approval rating recorded for a South Korean president since the nation's independence in 1948. When Park resigned in March 2017, South Korea's media traced this outcome to the pivotal role played by the mass demonstrations. Every Saturday night, South Korean TV stations, including KBS, MBC, SBS, but also

minor cable news channels such as JTBC and YTN and conservative stations such as Chosun TV, covered the nationwide demonstrations in live broadcasts. Despite ideological differences, all media referred to the protests as a manifestation of the "order of the entire nation" (Lee J., 2016), calling for the president to resign. The demonstrations exerted strong pressure not only on the president and the ruling party but also on the opposition parties, which hesitated to follow through with the impeachment process after the scandal broke (Lee S. & Kim J., 2016), largely because they were unprepared for an early presidential election. Yet, the sustained mass protests forced the political parties to initiate the impeachment process in the National Diet (Seok J. & Lee S., 2016).

What has caused the anti-Park movement's formation, its cascading and critical influence? To explain government failure in presidential systems, the established comparative political science literature on state transitions in Eastern Europe, Latin America and Asia has either pointed to a lack of accountability and clientelism in post-authoritarian systems (Kitschelt & Wilkinson, 2007; Loxton & Mainwaring, 2018), the constraints of presidentialism on democratic government and political stability (Mainwaring & Shugart, 1997; Samuels & Shugart, 2011). Applied to the case of Park's impeachment, some studies have pointed to the general malfunction of the state's "integrity institutions". Here, the post-1987 South Korean state has remained incapable of ensuring transparency and state accountability thus causing the existence of a "hybrid regime" which features components of democratic and authoritarian government (Turner, Kwon, & O'Donnell, 2018; see also Kalinowski, 2016). In addition, studies have traced the political turmoil unfolding over Park's impeachment to the inability of South Korea's governing party which did not succeed in effectively foreclosing an impeachment. Focusing on political party failure, the political crisis of 2016-17 in this line of argument is the long-term result of the post-1987 electoral system (Shin, 2019).

Impeachment and scandals involving presidents are not unusual in the South Korean case; yet, the magnitude of public outrage against Park have exceeded past cases (Kihl, 2005). This article does not dispute the above literature, but adds a new analytical dimension highlighting the causal links between media narratives and mass protest as variables that explain why the anti-Park movement has gained

its momentum at such high pace. To make my case, I will analyze narratives that have formed among large parts of the South Korean society, and within the mass media. As only three years have passed the unfolding of Park's impeachment, the amount of empirical data available remains limited. While statistical data will be summoned, I argue such analysis will ultimately fail in linking dynamics of mass protest, media narratives, and presidential impeachment. Therefore, in a second step, I provide an alternative explanation for the proliferation of the anti-Park movement which focuses on the demonstrators' discourse. Here, I will broaden the analytical perspective in order to relocate the South Korea in the international context of "third wave" democratization cases (Huntington, 1991; Shin, 1994; Rose & Shin, 2001). This enables us to conclude that the recent case South Korean mass protest and impeachment resamples other cases of countries that have similarly experienced the overthrow of authoritarian rule and democratic consolidation during the 1970s-1980s.

2. The Legitimacy of Mass Protest

The 2016 anti-Park protest was mainly framed as a symbol of "the order of the entire nation"; therefore, the protest had a great impact on the impeachment process and played a crucial role in the collapse of the Park administration (Jung J., 2016). However, studies of democratic consolidation, protest movements and paths toward presidential impeachment in and outside of South Korea have shown that such sequence of events does not confirm a common pattern (Lee, 2005; Pérez-Liñán, 2007; Brownlee, 2007; Haggard & Kaufman, 2016). For example, in September 2011 in Japan, more than three hundred thousand demonstrators gathered in the vicinity of the National Diet Building to protest the restart of the nation's nuclear power plants (Sasahara, 2011). The protest occurred just six months after the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear plant accident in March 2011, and anti-nuclear sentiment was strong throughout Japan (Chiavacci and Obinger, 2018). However, the Japanese media did not cover these demonstrations in positive terms, and the governing Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) did not address these contentious voices. The opposing Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which largely supported the restarting of Japan's nuclear power plants won the 2012 general elections in a landslide. Following Prime Minister

Abe Shinzo's return to power the return to nuclear power became governmental policy.

In South Korea, a series of demonstrations have had influence on the national government's actions. For example, fearing bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE), in the summer of 2008, mass demonstrations known as "candlelight protests" unfolded in opposition to President Lee Myung-bak's decision to reopen South Korea to U.S. beef imports (Lee, Kim, & Wainwright, 2010). The organizers estimated that more than two hundred thousand people participated in the demonstration held on June 6 that year, in an attempt to stop the imports and to demand the resignation of Lee Myung-bak, who supported this policy. Yet, the protests ended without any significant political consequences and the Lee government continued to allow U.S. beef imports. Although Lee's approval rating decreased temporarily in the course of the demonstrations, they soon recovered after the economic downturn precipitated by the Lehman Brothers bankruptcy later in 2008 (Cho H., 2014).

Why did these large protests fail affect political outcomes? One plausible explanation is that in most cases of contentious politics and social mobilization, it is very hard for organizers to mobilize more than a small percentage of the population (Jenkins & Klandermans, 1995; Tarrow, 2012). Thus, in light of limited mobilization South Korea's political elites dismissed mass protests as activities by a political minority. Simply put, movements failed because they were seen to lack the support of a representative majority of society who has refrained from expressing its will through participating in such street protests. Applying this insight to the anti-Park demonstrations in 2016, it soon became clear that these protests were organized by progressive leaders, who had opposed the Park government from the outset (Korea Herald, 2016). Furthermore, the majority of demonstrators were originally supporters of opposing factions. Thus, at the beginning of the protests, many conservatives hesitated to join the demonstrations against the president whom they had supported all along. Initially, this allowed Park and her ruling party to ignore the growing opposition by dismissing it as a minority interest. Ultimately, however, the demonstrations were seen as the "will of the entire nation," and they exerted significant influence on South Korean politics (Ock, 2017).

It is important to understand how these demonstrations, originally dismissed

as inconsequential, gained the power and legitimacy to end the Park government. As the recent rise in scholarship on populism and the crisis of democracy illustrates (Diamond, Plattner, & Walker 2016; Przeworski, 2018; Levitzky & Ziblatt 2018), citizens all over the world seem to be increasingly frustrated with the established political elite and their governments. In the same year as the anti-Park demonstrations erupted, the world witnessed massive discontent across the United States during the presidential election and in Great Britain as a result of the "Brexit" referendum. These frustrations are widely understood to be the result of globalization and the neo-liberal policy consensus; thus, citizens voted against existing ruling elites and the policies they have implemented (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Chu B., 2016).

Is the South Korean case comparable to other countries or must we analyze the South Korean situation as an isolated phenomenon that can only be explained in a domestic context? If this case is not isolated, how can it be understood in an international context?

3. Political Scandals in South Korea and the First Presidential Impeachment

How did the South Korean public interpret the impact of the demonstrations on the impeachment process? Perhaps the most frequently employed interpretation is that the demonstrations reflect "an unprecedented scandal in the history of the South Korean Constitution" (Kim J. & Kim S., 2016). Certainly, the scandal was a catalyst for the massive anti-Park movement, and it is impossible to explain the protest's development without understanding the South Korean public's reaction to the scandal. Yet, does the scandal alone explain the demonstrations? The Park scandal was not the first scandal involving a South Korean president (Kong T., 2000). President Roh Tae-woo was sentenced to seventeen years in prison on charges of bribery and staging a military coup in 1997, four years after the end of his presidency.

Kim Young-sam, who succeeded Roh Tae-woo in office, had to apologize to the nation for a scandal in which his son was bribed by a *chaebol* concern that faced bankruptcy and requested government aid. Even Kim Dae-jung, who led the first summit meeting between North and South Korea in 2000 and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his reconciliation efforts the following year, was scandal

ridden. In addition to apologizing for illegally sending money to North Korea for the summit meeting, he was forced to apologize in 2002 for another scandal in which his sons were bribed to use their personal influence to promote a businessman in the government. President Roh Moo-hyun committed suicide in 2008 as a result of a political scandal involving him and his family, which was revealed after the end of his term. In July 2012, Lee Myung-bak publicly apologized for the behavior of his older brother, Lee Sang-deuk, one of the most influential agents in the Lee administration, who was arrested for bribery and sentenced to fifteen months in jail in 2017.

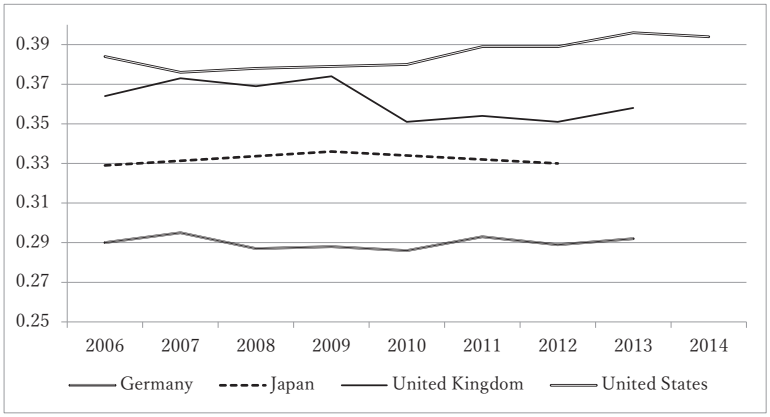
In this vein, Park's scandal involving her confidante Choi Soon-sil's was not very different from previous political scandals. In fact, in many ways it was less severe. For example, Roh Tae-woo was bribed with more than $300 million (Peerenboom, 2003, 401). The $26 million bribery associated with the Park scandal is a fraction of that. Park's scandal was similar to other presidential scandals in yet another manner. Many previous presidential scandals involved the corruption by the presidents' family members, which the presidents themselves were often unable to predict or stop. This was also the case with Park, who could not stop Choi Soon-sil's corruption. However, before Park Geun-hye, no huge demonstrations called for the immediate resignation of a president involved in a political scandal. Why then did Park face such demonstrations? Why did she become the first president in South Korean history to be impeached? Widespread economic inequality under the Park administration is commonly cited by South Korean and international media as a reason for the outrage against Park (Kim S., 2016; Choe S., 2017). In the next section I will discuss this claim.

4. Economic Inequality and Political Distrust

What was the state of economic distribution in South Korea at the time of the Park scandal? **Figure 1** shows the Gini coefficient, which is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income or wealth distribution of a nation's residents, for four Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development countries: Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The figure illustrates that the Gini coefficient tends to differ among all four countries. In

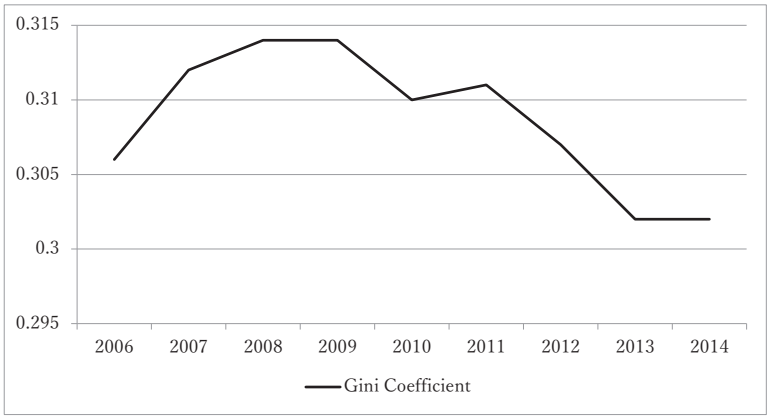
contrast, the Gini coefficient for South Korea for the same period was significantly different (see **Figure 2**). The economic gap in South Korea has in fact decreased under the Park government. As this suggests that the economic gap was declining, it seems incorrect to explain the anti-Park demonstrations as primarily driven by economic disparity.

Figure 1: Gini Coefficient 2006–2014 (Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States)



Source: OECD Income Distribution Database: Gini, Poverty, Income, Methods and Concepts (http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm), last visited on April 20, 2020.

Figure 2: Gini Coefficient 2006–2014 (South Korea)



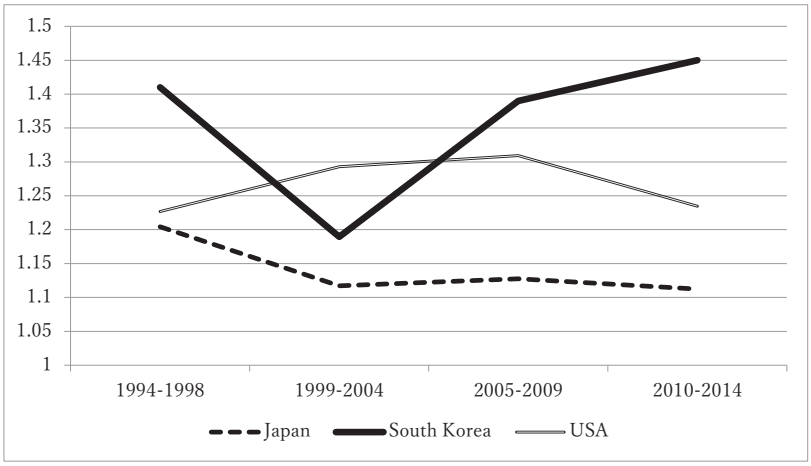
Source: OECD Income Distribution Database: Gini, Poverty, Income, Methods and Concepts (http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm), last visited on April 20, 2020.

In addition, Park supporter belonged to lower income groups than the supporters of the opposition (Kyung Hyang, 2017). At the same time, the income gap among the employed, excluding retired workers, increased under the Park government. The complexity of the income gap in South Korea under the Park government makes it difficult to explain the frustrations against Park by only focusing on economic inequality. In addition to the increasing income gaps narrative, the media discourse has emphasized a growing confrontation between young and old was as a significant element in the reaction to the Park scandal (Moon, 2017). However, this discourse does also lack sufficient empirical evidence. The confrontation between young and old, in which the younger generation supports the progressive party and older generations support the conservative party, has not changed since previous elections, including the 2007 presidential election (Jeong H., 2015).

In short, South Koreans are aware of the gap in living standards and the generation conflict (Ahn C., 2016), but these issues themselves not new or unique features of the political context behind the protest against Park and her impeachment. Therefore, these two narratives do not explain why the frustration about the Park scandal was so widespread, vehement, and different from previous governments.

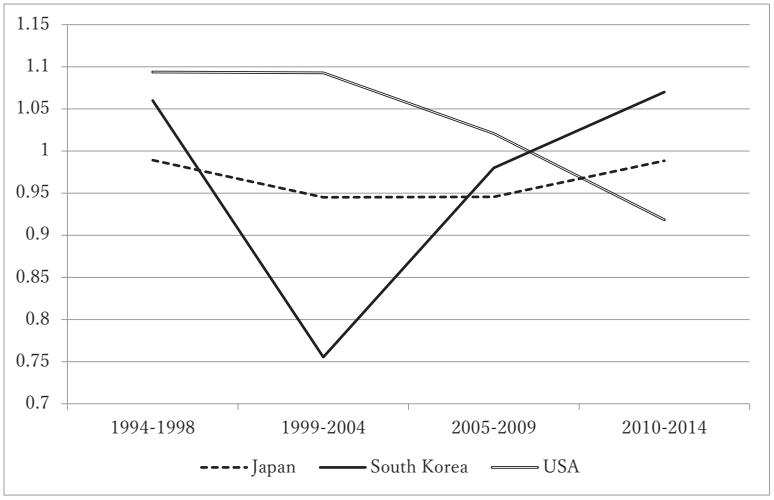
Another common explanation for the anti-Park movement is distrust of politicians (Choi H., 2016). There is no doubt that distrust of politicians was widespread in the wake of the Park scandal, but the distrust was a result of the scandal. However, in order for distrust of politicians to explain the beginning of the anti-Park movement, the distrust must have existed before the scandal, not after. What, then, was the actual level of distrust before the Park scandal? **Figures 3** and **4** show data from the World Value Survey about distrust of politicians in South Korea, the United States, and Japan. In comparison, in South Korea, the lowest level of trust of political organizations was not in 2010–2014 under the conservative governments of Lee and Park but during the period of progressive governments during 1999–2004. In contrast, confidence in South Korea's parliament, the National Diet, and government improved during the past decade. Thus, this high level of political distrust does not explain the eruption and sudden growth of the anti-Park protests.

Figure 3: Confidence in Parliament



Source: World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), last visited on April 20, 2020.

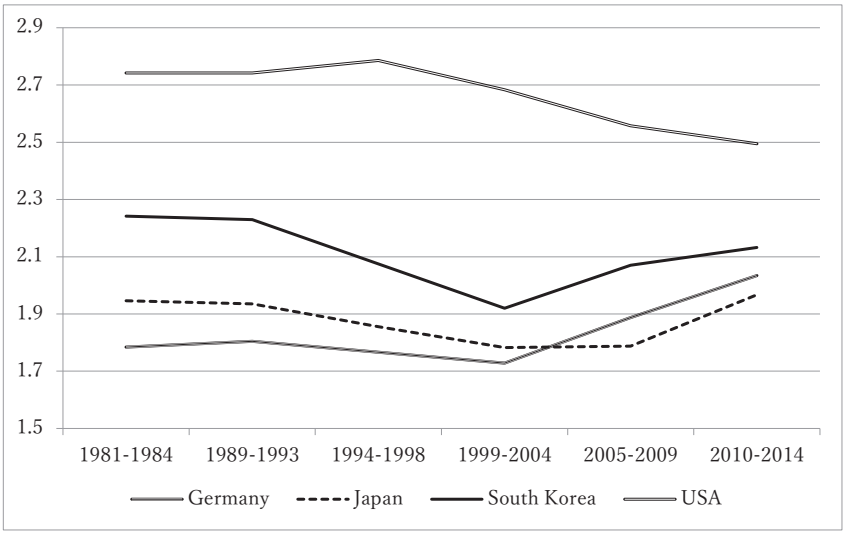
Figure 4: Confidence in the Government (World Value Survey)



Source: World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), last visited on April 20, 2020.

We can observe similar trends when focusing on recent trends in national pride. **Figure 5** shows the data on national pride for South Korea, Germany, Japan, and the United States. The figure illustrates that South Koreans have regained national pride during the course of the past decade. This means that South Koreans today are recovering their confidence in society. This increase can be largely

Figure 5: National Pride



Source: World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), last visited on April 20, 2020.

explained by South Korea's recovery from the 1997 Asian financial crisis (Kimura, 2007). It is natural for citizens to recover trust in society during such a recovery process.

5. Locating South Korea in an International Context

What, then, were the possible causes for the massive anti-Park movement and its legitimacy? Was the movement a result of dynamics unique to South Korea?

To answer these questions, it is necessary to once again look at the discourses mobilized in course of the anti-Park protests. One of the most prominent discourses of the protests was the slogan "What kind of country is this?" (Um J. & Kim J., 2016). Ahn Cheol-soo, an opposition leader and a major candidate in the 2017 presidential election, was the first opponent to use this phrase to condemn Park and her administration. This phrase quickly spread throughout the nation and soon became one of the most frequently used phrases by anti-Park demonstrators.

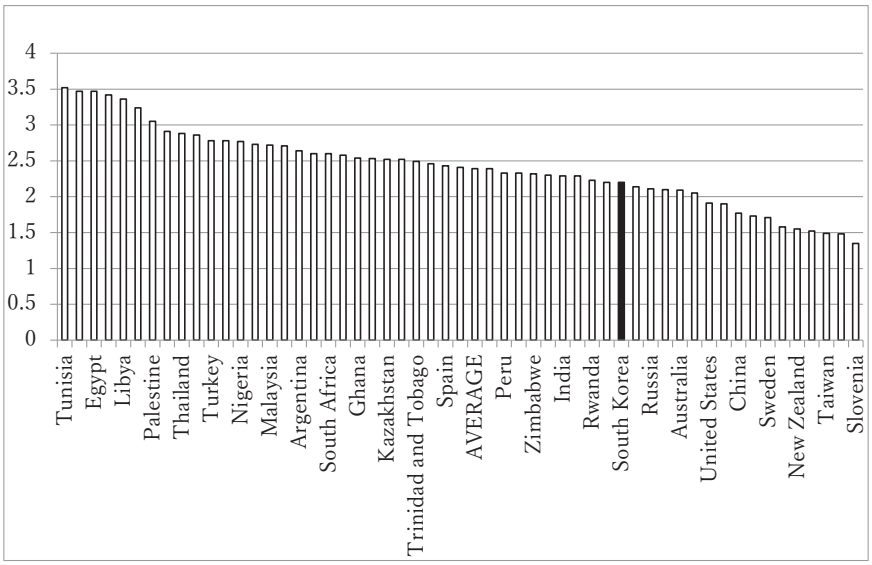
The anti-Park movement was triggered by political scandal, and just by high levels of public frustration caused by economic inequality or political distrust.

Another example is the scandal involving Jung Yura, Choi Soon-sil's daughter. Jung was severely criticized by the South Korean media when she was admitted to a famous women's university due to Choi's personal relationship with the presidents. People were upset by this revelation because it amplified the unequal opportunities that existed in South Korea. In that sense, the unequal treatment by the government was a major factor driving public anger (Yonhap News, 2017).

Similar examples in which people were frustrated with government unfairness can be found internationally. In 2016, in Indonesia, a demonstration called for the resignation of a governor, and more than fifty thousand people joined the protests in the capital (Quiano & Griffiths, 2016). Venezuelan citizens have also organized massive demonstrations in the capital, in which hundreds of thousands of people called for the socialist president, Nicol s Maduroto, to resign (Hanna & Sanchez, 2017). In Malaysia (CNN, 2016), Colombia (Chan & Westcott, 2017), and Brazil (Associated Press, 2016), people also gathered in the streets to protest government corruption. In all of these cases, the demonstrators called for fairness, accountability, transparency and social equality.

To what extend are the demonstrations in these nations similar to the case of South Korea? As I have discussed earlier, the South Korean situation cannot be compared in the same context as other OECD nations. Another big difference between South Korea and countries such as the United States in 2016 is the existence of massive demonstrations to protest against the existing government (Borowiec & Lee J., 2017). Although it was very clear that people supporting Donald Trump were frustrated with the government and business executives, supporters expressed their frustration not by street protest but at the ballot box. This is also the case for other developed countries. In Great Britain, people expressed their dissatisfaction with the European Union not by demonstrating but by voting for the "Brexit". In countries with a long history of democracy, there are significant social frustrations, but such frustrations are not directly linked to street activities. Perhaps, we may argue, this is because these countries lack a culture of large-scale political demonstrations, but at the same time, individuals in these countries are still trying to change their society through means of electoral not street action. In South Korea, citizens do not have the same level of trust as have citizens of countries with a long history of democracy in

Figure 6: Mean Number of Recent Peaceful Demonstrations Attended (2010–2014)



Source: World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), last visited on April 20, 2020.

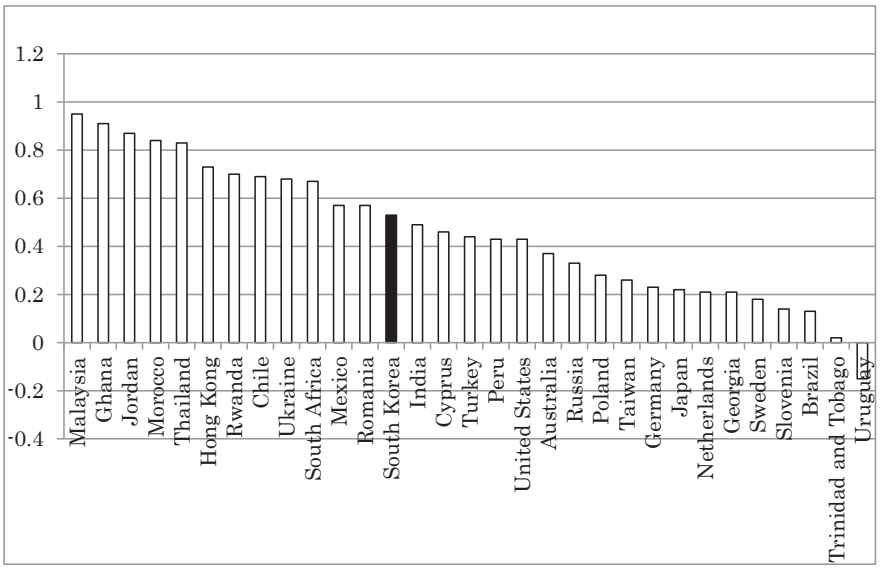
the existing democratic system, which is why they protest in the streets.

Figure 6 shows how many times people attended demonstrations across the world annually. These countries are not developed countries with a long history of democracy where people join peaceful demonstrations more often but are developing countries with new democracies. Surprisingly, if compared with the citizens in these countries, South Koreans generally attend peaceful demonstrations less often.

Figure 7 shows how attendance at demonstrations changed from 2005–2009 to 2010–2014. Interestingly, in all countries except Uruguay, attendance increased. This trend is more typical in developed countries with new democracies. This figure indicates that the South Korean demonstrations in 2016 were not an isolated phenomenon in the world. The data shows how the attendance at peaceful demonstrations increased from 2005–2009 to 2010–2014. "One" means individuals attended one more demonstration in a year than during the previous period.

Given the fact that in new democracies the political institutions were established in recent memory, distrust of the government easily translates into distrust of the democratic system. The democratization leaders then become

Figure 7: Increased Number of Peaceful Demonstrations Attended (Mean)



Source: World Value Survey (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp), last visited on April 20, 2020.

receptors for that distrust. In South Korea, as in many countries, the social and political situations have improved since the country became a democracy. In previous decades, there was more corruption, but citizens endured it because they hoped to fix this problem through the means of democratization. Unfortunately, expectations for improvement outpaced the effects of democratization. For people who grew up and were educated after South Korea became a democracy in 1987, their society looks as corrupt as the past looked to the older generations. In countries that experienced democratization several decades ago, the disillusion about the democracies established then is spreading rapidly. The success of democratization movements and the accompanying massive demonstrations are still fresh. This appears to be the reason of why people today mobilize mass protests in such countries to demand radical political change.

6. South Korea's Democratization Betrayed?

The political frustration in South Korea is not an isolated phenomenon. However, it differs from comparable situations in other countries. South Korea's

frequent massive demonstrations at which people tried to realize their hopes are clearly different from developed countries with a longer history of democratic government. Of course, in countries such as the United States, there is also frustration with political leaders. However, in developed countries, people have no memory of having changed society through their political activism; therefore, citizens try to change their situation by voting.

In this way, South Korea is dissimilar from older democracies in developed countries. In contrast, countries that experienced democratization only a few decades ago still have fresh memories of democratization and the huge demonstrations with which they defeated the old regimes. Democracy is still new; thus, they believe that they can start from the beginning.

It is thus interesting that South Koreans elected Moon Jae-in after the collapse of the Park government. As the leader of the influential Roh-Mu-hyun faction of progressives, Moon is clearly a champion of old business executives on the progressive side. His election indicates that South Koreans still trust such executives. The other major candidates, such as Ahn Cheol-soo and Hong Jun-pyo, are also old business executives, who had played important roles in South Korean politics for years. The parties could not find a new populistic star like Donald Trump (Borowiec & Lee J., 2017).

How can Moon and old progressive business executives tackle a situation in which people want more fairness in society? One possible answer may be political reform accompanied by constitutional amendments. South Koreans, who once believed that they could create a fair society with democratization, now doubt whether the democracy they have is legitimate.

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