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“Is This Supposed to be a Country?”

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On the night of 11 March 11 2017, the Gwanghwamun Square in the South Korean capital city, Seoul, was packed with the nation's citizens. The previous day was a historic day in the Korean history -- the Constitutional Court had ruled for the dismissal of the embattled president, Park Geun-hye. It was the first time in the nation's history that the president was impeached. To celebrate the impeachment, a citizens' rally was held. The stage was set up, the crowd shouted victorious slogans, then sang the anti-Park Geun-hye anthem, “이게 나라냐 사범 윤민석”, which translates as “Is This Supposed to be a Country?” in English.

The song is composed by a popular progressive songwriter Yoon Min-suk. It begins with a strong message “resign, resign, resign” -- an explicit demand for Park Geun-hye to resign. But the lyrics also attack other figures and entities such Choi Soon-sil, the business woman who benefited from political ties with President Park; the former President Lee Myung-bak; the President Park's Saenuri Party; as well as the prominent newspaper, Chosun Ilbo. The message of the lyrics is clear, “criminals enjoy heaven, people suffer in the hell”; politicians, political parties, chaebol (conglomerates with political connections) and major mass media -- all of them are described as privileged class who exploit Korean people and enrich themselves.

9 March 2017

On the evening of 9 March, the night before the judgment of the Constitutional Court, I headed to the Gwanghwamun Square with three colleagues of mine. At around 6 PM, people were beginning to gather there. The main stage and sound equipment were being set up. Korean media as well as those from abroad were on standby. WiFi service for the demonstrators had been prepared. Anti-riot police formed a line on both sides of the main roads. Strangely enough, there was no tension; LED candles that had become the symbol of the anti-Park demonstration appeared have sold well, and demonstration related flyers were being handed out.

After 8:00 pm, a crowd of about a couple of hundreds began to march from the square toward the Constitutional Court, and formed a rally in the main road in front of the Court. The rally attracted thousands other demonstrators, seemingly coming out of nowhere. There were youngs and olds, parents and children, wheelchair-

bound men, and more. In the cold weather, the people continued to sing big “Is This Supposed to be a Country?”. The road in front of the Constitutional Court became a meeting place, which was sealed up by the police, and police officers were watching the demonstration from a distance.

10 March 2017

In the morning of 10 March, a few hours before the Constitutional Court revealed its verdict, you could feel the tension in the atmosphere. From dawn, Korean media had begun commentaries and speculations concerning the verdict, which was set to be announced at 11 o'clock. A TV station even displayed a countdown clock on the screen. Thousands of citizens gathered at the Gwanghwamun Square from morning.

Shortly after 11 o'clock, the reading of the judgment sentence began and the dismissal of President Park was handed over at 11:30. My colleagues and I, on our way to Yonsei University, followed the reading of the verdict from inside a taxi by way of a radio broadcast, but arriving before the final verdict was read. As soon as we got off the taxi, we asked a student about the result of the judgment. The student replied, “impeachment,” with a smile. We had an academic seminar at the university on that day, but one could sense a cheerful atmosphere permeating through the faculty members and graduate students at the seminar.

Occupy Movement(s)

While in Seoul, I also witnessed a scene that I did not see being reported in the Japanese media. It happened right next to the Gwanghwamun Square. There is a Korean government office complex there. In front of the complex, there was a labor union that had erected a tent and was making public critique against anti-labor policy. Workers placed demands such as work guarantee for irregular workers, and improvement of working conditions. The number of this much smaller sitting rally was less than 20 people, but they persisted in the severe winter cold.

Most of the crowd there however appeared to take no notice of this little demonstration by a labor union and their modest tents, and was either hastily heading to the demonstration venue or in a hurry to go home. I saw a scene similar to it in other spots as well. The pro-Park Geun-hye demonstrators occupied a part of the Seoul City Hall Square. They supported the president and her pro-US policy. Again, for the most part passersby walked about between these tents, unflustered by their existence.

Anxiety and Dissatisfaction

It seems that public dissatisfaction and anxiety have intensified in the Korean society. Under the government's neo-liberal economic policy, Korean economy did not improve as expected, while socio-economic disparity widened. On the one hand, Korean elites are required to adapt to global standards, gaining high income while competing globally. And yet the employment rate of new college graduates is around 50 percent. It is getting harder for new college graduates to obtain decent jobs, even for those who graduate from elite colleges. Therefore, students take extra years to acquire additional skills such as a foreign language in order to increase their selling

points in the tough job market. Many of them still aspired to obtain steady job in *chaebol* or bureaucracy. On the other, since the government altered its immigration law in 2004 that allows short-term migrant workers to take blue-collar jobs, low skilled Korean citizens have faced even tougher competition in the job market. This has forced them to compromise by taking irregular part-time employment with no social security. Because of the lack of comprehensive social security and chronic corruptions in politics, the future might not be too bright for many citizens in Korea. This situation pushes them to raise their voices against the government.

Unheard voices, however, remain uncovered by the conventional media as well as the social media. Under the cold weather, workers who did not sing “Is This Supposed to be a Country?” along with the anti-Park Geun-hye crowd persisted.

About the Author

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