Democracy and Peace in Korea Twenty Years After June 1987: Where Are We Now, and Where Do We Go from Here?

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The June Struggle for Democracy and the Regime of 1987

The nationwide uprising of June 1987 put an end to the tyrannical rule of Chun Du-hwan's regime and opened a new chapter in South Korea's contemporary history. True, it has had its background in the April 19th Student Revolution of 1960, the Pusan-Masan Uprising of 1979 and the May Democratic Struggle of Kwangju 1980.

Police lead activists away in Kwangju, 1980

But it represents a categorically new achievement in having initiated a democratization process that has continued for the past twenty years without experiencing reversals such as the military takeovers of May 16, 1961 and May 17, 1980. At the same time, there is a prevalent sense of crisis in Korea today that the so-called '87 regime that was formed after June 1987 has now reached its limit and is in need of a new breakthrough.

While searching for an answer, some analysts offer a diagnosis that although formal and procedural democracy was achieved through the June Struggle, substantive democracy in the economic and social fields has remained inadequate or has even suffered a retreat. This view grasps only part of the truth and we must beware of such a facile dichotomy. Political democracy itself, even after its foundation was laid by the establishment of a democratic constitution and the direct presidential election in 1987, still had to be fought for and arduously extended at each step through the regimes of Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Mu-hyun. Nor can we yet assure ourselves of its 'irreversible achievement', even though the possibility of reversal through a military coup has more or less been eliminated. Furthermore, just as the July-August Great Labor Struggles of 1987 led both to improvements in workers' welfare and an advance in procedural democracy, the distinction between the 'form' and 'substance' of democracy is at best facile.

Behind the easy resort to such distinction is the assumption that the true aim of the June Struggle was to build 'people's democracy' or socialism—or at least social democracy—in South Korea. From such a vantage point, the June 29th Declaration (by government candidate Roh Tae-woo acceding to many of the protesters' overt demands) was nothing more than a deceptive move to prevent the full success of the popular

struggle, and such interpretation turns the past twenty years into a period of thwarted hopes where the people won the shell but lost the core of democracy. In my view, this is a very one-sided interpretation of Korea's reality. Going beyond such one-sidedness is an important task for us as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the June Struggle.

At any rate, there exists a broad consensus that the 'regime of 1987' (if we call by that name the general political, economic, and social order created by the June Struggle and its immediate aftermath) constitutes an order much superior to what preceded it, but that it was from the beginning an unstable structure based on a number of make-shift compromises, and has by now almost reached the end of its tether. True, some would go further and assert that it was already replaced by the 'regime of 1997' at the time of the financial crisis and the IMF bailout. Others contend that the '87 regime has been finally destroyed in 2007 by the government's arbitrary decision to conclude a Free Trade Agreement with the United States; while still others, of the 'New Right', call for the launching of a 'regime of 2007' in a different sense, namely, one that puts an end to the 'pro-North Korean leftist regimes' (i.e., those of Kim Dae-Jung and Roh Moo-hyun) through this year's presidential election. All in all, one rarely hears a voice claiming the health of the '87 regime and its warrant for continued existence.

Looking Beyond the '87 Regime

The vision of overcoming the '87 regime depends largely on what we consider to be the larger system of which the '87 regime is a subclass, and within what more comprehensive scheme of periodization we place the post-1987 period. For instance, the argument (including the above mentioned notion of 'the 1997 regime') that the progress in political democracy since 1987 actually amounts to the failure of substantive democracy, accompanied as it was with the ascendancy of neoliberalism, represents a point of view that seeks to understand the South Korean society of the last twenty years mainly in terms of the 'neoliberal phase' (beginning in the early 1980s) of the modern world-system.

It is an undeniable fact that South Korea exists as a part of the capitalist world-system, and that the global trend of neoliberalism has exercised a great influence on the post-1987 history. However, in order to determine the precise extent and manner of that influence, and the best possible response that South Korean society may adopt toward it, we need not only a more exact understanding of neoliberalism, but a closer analysis of the concrete ways in which it affects Korean society.

I am no expert in either of the two topics, but I will try to lay down my basic understanding of the concept of neoliberalism. In my view, it is an attempt to return to an even older form of liberalism than the 'old' liberalism itself, namely, to liberalism in its early days before it managed through a laborious route to combine itself with values of democracy and the welfare state. Capitalism in its crisis of accumulation in the late twentieth century has decided to subvert those values and replace them with the resuscitated doctrine of unrestricted free market.[1] One may well doubt whether this 'new' liberalism may even qualify as 'liberalism', since it has lost even the progressive aspects of early capitalism, such as the removal of feudal fetters and the promotion of healthy individualism, attempting instead to solidify the inequalities created by contemporary capitalism.

Even so, the effects of neoliberalism differ according to the time and place. In South Korea's case, the decisive turning point for its ascendancy was the financial crisis of 1997, but the consequences also included the implementation of certain reforms either liberal or democratic in nature that Korean society urgently required. Ending the arbitrary dominance over the

financial institutions by the government was one of them, and the financial crisis also helped the peaceful transition of political power to the opposition in 1998, facilitating the political reforms in the initial days of the Kim Daejung government. Of course, one may offer the counterargument that all such reforms only contributed to the expansion of liberal politics and the establishment of capitalist institutions, but in that case one must produce a fuller critique of liberalism or capitalism per se, together with persuasive short-, middle- and long-term projects for countering it, rather than using 'neoliberalism' as a blanket term to include everything one opposes.

Global perspective is not the only requirement necessary to illuminate the concrete nature of the '87 regime. The peninsular or all-Korean perspective must come into play as well, given the fact that Korea still is a divided country. At a symposium commemorating the 10th anniversary of the June Struggle, I proposed that "instead of seeing the June Democratic Uprising only within the context of South Korea's history, we should comprehend and evaluate it as an occurrence within the peninsula-wide division system." ('The Historical Significance of the June Struggle and the Meaning of its Tenth Anniversary', The Shaking Division System, Seoul: Changbi Publishers, 1998, p. 212) Although the country was first partitioned in 1945 and separate regimes established in 1948, it was only after the Korean War ended in a stalemate in 1953 that the division came to take on a certain systemic character.[2] This division system subsequently survived such challenges as the April Revolution of 1960 and the Kwangju Uprising of 1980, and was not terminated by the June Struggle of 1987, either. When seen from this perspective, the '87 regime comprises a subclass of what we may call the 1953 regime.

But the division system entered a period of instability when one of its pillars, the military dictatorship in the South, was overturned. It lost another, a crucial one at the global level, when the East-West Cold War came to an end. Then in June 2000, with the North-South summit meeting in Pyongyang and the June 15 Joint Declaration issued there, the prospect of overcoming the '53 regime finally came into view.

As this brief survey shows, applying the peninsular perspective on the '87 regime is not a 'division-centered reductionism' that emphasizes only the inter-Korean relations at the expense of changes within South Korea or the global geopolitical order. The very term '1987 regime' is an appellation that foregrounds events internal to the South, and implies such major domestic agendas as continuation of the democratizing process, the search for a new developmental model, and either the accommodation or the rejection of neoliberalism. But the peninsular perspective does insist on not losing sight of the fact that responses even to these domestic agendas operate within the force field of the division system and that domestic progress in democracy has owed much of its success to factors like reunification movements at the civilian level, which never stopped even under the '53 regime, and to attempts at the government level to mitigate the North-South confrontation such as the Roh Tae-woo regime's 'Northern policy' (itself an achievement of the '87 regime).

Consequently, the recognition in the division system theory of the decisive significance of the year 2000 represents a different stance from that of 'national liberation' or nationalistic privileging of reunification above all other goals. The 'Age of June 15' that takes the year 2000 as its starting point does have a special meaning in providing a periodization scheme that the two Koreas have seldom been able to share since the partition in 1945, and especially since 1953 (the year of the Armistice), but the degree of its realization in terms of the concrete social reality on either side remains rather limited. Not that it has been working at the symbolic and ideological level

only, for its impact on everyday life, too, has been considerable. Yet, speaking of the South, 'the Age of June 15' has not terminated the '53 regime and indeed, cannot even be said to have ended the '87 regime.

Kim Dae Jung (left) meets Kim Jong Il in Pyongyang in 2000

The IMF crisis of 1997 was much more powerful so far as direct impact on South Korean people's daily lives is concerned. To find in it the inauguration of the '97 regime, however, amounts to an overestimation of the progressive character of the '87 regime. In other words, such a view minimizes the many inherent limitations of this regime as a subclass of the '53 regime, and overlooks the fact that the 1997 financial crisis was no more than a dramatic exposure of South Korean society's pursuit, in some ways more reckless than anything before 1987, of the dream of 'joining the advanced nations' and 'absorbing North Korea'.

At the same time, it is still another oversimplification to assume that the positive dynamics of the '87 regime were totally exhausted in the IMF crisis. Again, more adequate appraisals demand the peninsular perspective, which provides a much more complex yet in its own way a coherent picture of the interconnections between 1987, 1997 and 2000. In this picture, 1987 marks a decisive turning point in the democratization of South Korea and inaugurates the 'period of oscillation' of the division system, but neither the constitution nor the major political parties nor even most of the social movements of the '87 regime set out with 'the overcoming of the division system' as a clearly conceived agenda. The consequent accumulation of unresolved problems led to the economic crisis of 1997 and in combination with the crisis in the North including the food crisis, came to seriously challenge the division system. The ensuing June 15 Joint Declaration would then represent at once the direct effect of the peninsula-wide crisis and the product of the resilience and dynamism of the Korean people seeking a new opening in mutual reconciliation, cooperation and gradual reintegration, rather than in persisting with the status quo or resorting to an increased dependence on foreign powers.

I have argued that the year 2000 marks the turning point from the division system's period of 'oscillation' to 'disintegration' (Unification Korean-Style, Present Progressive Tense, Changbi Publishers 2006, p. 6), but periodizations that take as their respective unit of analysis the whole Korean peninsula and only one half of it need not be in full agreement. Thus, the view that the '87 regime in the South has persisted beyond 2000 does not necessarily contradict the notion of 'the period of disintegration of the division system' that begins in the year 2000. However, for such disintegration to run its course and lead to a better system, the overcoming of the decrepit '87 regime in the South is a prerequisite. The 20th anniversary of the June Struggle, when the international conjuncture seems more favorable than ever for the establishment of a framework for peace in the Korean peninsula, and the terminal symptoms of the '87 regime are becoming daily more apparent, would be the moment for taking a decisive step toward a new age.

South Korea's Choice in 2007

2007 also happens to be the year of the presidential election in the South—another reason for its potential as a decisive watershed.

Voices in the conservative camps of South Korea, too, find in this year's presidential election a crossroads for the entire peninsula, rather than just an opportunity for retrieving political power

in the South. The goal is to put an end to the period of drifting since 1987, particularly the rule of 'pro-North leftist' forces over the last ten years and to launch a regime of 'becoming advanced'. In my view however, the electoral victory of the conservative opposition will hardly result in overcoming the '87 regime. Despite the belligerent pronouncements by speakers of the 'New Right' and hardliners within the opposition party, I do not believe that even if returned to office, they can overturn the results of the democratization process since 1987 or abrogate the June 15 Joint Declaration.

On the other hand, with the prolonging of the 'bad stalemate' of the '87 regime, this regime's terminal symptoms may become aggravated. This is not a partisan argument to oppose in principle the coming to power of a particular political party. It merely conveys the judgment that any party that seizes power under the hegemony of elements that find little to criticize in the '53 regime—not even in the '53 regime before 1987—and consider the period of democratic reform governments as nothing but 'ten lost years' can only add to the woes of the waning '87 regime. Indeed, things will not prove any better even if a 'grand conservative coalition' of some sort is formed under a government that once proudly flaunted its reformist and democratic credentials but is now attempting to force a speedy conclusion of the Korea-US FTA with conservative blessings.

'Radical (or transformative) centrism' is the term I have used to characterize what today's Korean society needs. (Reunification Korean-Style, Present Progressive Tense, pp. 30-31, 58-60) Its explicit use dates from a relatively recent past, but actually it was already apparent with the opening of a new stage after the June Struggle that neither of the two main currents of the radical movement, namely, 'national liberation' and 'people's revolution', nor moderate reformism lacking any visions of social transformation, could meet the demands of the time.[3] In the period of tyrannical rule by the government of a divided nation, mere advocacy of the principle of peaceful and autonomous reunification or of an egalitarian society, or the immediate struggle for basic civil rights could serve to shake the division system. However, with the end of military dictatorship and the newly opened space for more substantive endeavors, the need arose for a centrist line that could incorporate the various agendas of various forces with a view to a clearly conceived goal of transforming the division system.

Close to twenty years later, Korea now finds itself in an even more urgent need of a line focused on radical transformation in this sense and broadly centrist in practice. Since the '87 regime essentially comprises a part of the '53 regime and many of its problems derive from the vertical repressiveness (vis-à-vis its people) and lateral weakness (vis-à-vis foreign powers) of the division system itself, any project of overcoming the '87 regime that lacks a broader design of transforming the division system can hardly succeed. This is true not only of the conservative logic that finds little problem with the '53 regime, but also of the 'anti-neoliberal' position that underestimates the determinative influence of the division system, and of the line of 'reunification through national self-reliance opposing American obstruction', which does foreground the fact of national division but remains too little aware of its systemic character.

As a matter of fact, forces of progressive reform had managed to form a fairly broad coalition in the movement criticizing the Korea-US FTA negotiations. Along with forces opposing the FTA from the start for reasons of 'national autonomy' or 'social equality', people critical of the conduct and certain particulars of the negotiations joined in the efforts to stop an overhasty agreement. The result, as is well known, was a failure: the deal was announced in early April in time to meet the deadline set by America's Trade Promotion Act. The biggest

cause for that failure must be the determined drive on the part of President Roh Moo-hyun and his 'participatory government,' while one contributing factor may be found in the temporary setback suffered by popular movements when North Korea carried out a nuclear test in October 2006. We must also admit, however, that the movement itself, unable to go beyond a largely tactical alliance of various camps with different implicit agendas, showed a limit in its ability to persuade a preponderant majority of the population.

With the successful conclusion of the negotiations, even that tactical alliance has suffered considerable damage. Some of the once moderate critics have moved to a more militant position rejecting outright the results of the negotiation, but many others have resigned themselves to the eventual ratification of the FTA and are adopting the line that, having succeeded in removing some of the worst provisions, we ought now try to make the best of the situation and prepare for the aftermath. On another side, those who have opposed in principle all free trade agreements, or at least any FTA with the United States, are enraged by the deal yet also welcome the new political terrain where a clear line seems to be drawn between two camps, for and against the Korea-US FTA.

The point, however, is whether such a configuration augurs well for overcoming the '87 regime. The strengthening of the more radical progressive camp(s) in such an alignment will not be without its positive meanings. But there is an acute risk that an easy electoral victory for the conservative opposition, plus the existence of radical sects satisfied with mere quantitative expansion, may prolong and further embitter the downward slide of the '87 regime in its final days. Precisely at this moment when room for unprincipled 'middle of the road reformists' has shrunk due to the conclusion of the FTA negotiations, we should bring about a regrouping of forces for progressive reform with 'radical centrism' as their main tenet—without of course, necessarily holding on to the term as an electoral slogan.

It is not certain whether these forces, plagued by the divisive influence of the so-called KORUS FTA, can achieve such unity. But just as a broad alliance was formed to oppose a rash deal, a similar alliance is both possible and necessary to prevent a quick ratification and the many undemocratic practices foreseeable in the process; and it need not be ruled out that, on the strength of a thorough and responsible scrutiny of the contents of the deal and their implications, the movement may come to agree on a course of action that will obtain wide popular support. Only, this time it must manage to go beyond mere tactical alliance and be able to persuade the public with a clear insight into the nature of the '87 regime and with effective projects for overcoming the division system.

'Reunification Korean-style' and the Role of 'the Third Party'

'Radical centrism' can become a realistic alternative because of the unique character of the reality of the Korean peninsula. Korea is peculiar enough in remaining divided to this day, but it constitutes a truly unprecedented case in that the process of its reintegration differs from any previous case of national unification. Briefly put, not only is a Vietnamese-style reunification through military conquest out of the question in Korea, but even a peaceful reunification, unlike that of Germany or of Yemen, can only proceed gradually, stage by stage. And it so happens that such a reunification process has already been agreed to between the top leaders of North and South Korea in the June 15 Joint Declaration.

Such an agreement has a far-reaching effect not confined to the relations between the two governments. Initiatives by ordinary citizens are bound to be limited in a speedy, one-shot unification, whether violent or peaceful. In

contrast, a gradual, step-by-step process opens up space for civic participation. And where, as in South Korea, civil society possesses both the will and the ability to utilize this space, citizens' say in determining the timing and the specific contents of a given intermediate stage must continue to increase, and eventually it will not be possible to prevent the sphere of civic participation extending to the entire peninsula.

From such viewpoint, I have argued that South Korea's civil society—taking it in a broad sense to include the private business sector as well—ought to function as a 'third party' besides the two governments. As yet, this 'third party' remains far too weak to act as an equal partner, nor does our civil society display sufficient self-consciousness or self-esteem as 'the third party'. But the expansion of civic participation will be inevitable as the DPRK-US relations improve and inter-Korean exchanges proceed in full swing. Here I shall consider two contingencies in which the role of 'the third party' may prove decisive.

One may come about in the course of resolving the issue of North Korea's nuclear programs. As I prepare this text at the end of April, no solution has yet been found to the problem of North Korean accounts at BDA (Banco Delta Asia in Macao), and the initial steps specified by the February 13th Agreement have not been followed through. Yet the more general view still is that the Six-Party Talks will be able, even if after repeated delays, to go through the second stage of 'disablement', while considerable skepticism prevails regarding the possibility of reaching the final stage of 'dismantlement' of all nuclear programs. Of course, we need not give up hopes of completing at some time the third stage as well, since North Korean authorities have strongly asserted that "the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula is an injunction to posterity by the late President Kim Il Sung" and also because the United States will not agree to provide adequate compensation for any settlement short of 'dismantlement'.

The problem will arise however, in the event of a tacit collusion occurring between America's preference for withholding compensation and maintaining an appropriately controlled 'low-intensity nuclear crisis' and the North Korean calculation that there exists no surer means of regime security than possessing nuclear weapons. This of course is sheer conjecture, but if or when such a situation comes into existence, one can hardly expect the South Korean government to display sufficient will or capability to effect a breakthrough. It will be a case requiring interventions by a civil society that advocates denuclearization not only as the North Korean leader's injunction to posterity but as a matter of utmost interest to the concrete lives of ordinary people in both Koreas.

The special role of 'the third party' would also be essential when the nuclear problem is satisfactorily resolved, DPRK-US relations normalized, and inter-Korean exchanges greatly expanded. One need not resort to the logic of hard-line defenders of vested interests to grant the possibility that such contingency might imply a real threat to the North Korean regime. A divided country is by definition unstable, and given the current balance of forces on the peninsula, it is the North that will feel seriously threatened by the presence of the other side. Probabilities for the smooth process of reform and opening in the manner of China or Vietnam should be rated low under the division system.
At the same time, the realities of the peninsula rule out the possibility of removing the instabilities of a division regime either by agreeing to a permanent division or through a speedy reunification. Precisely this state of affairs gave rise to the agreement in the June 15 Joint Declaration that the two Koreas would work for reunification but without haste, by going through an intermediate stage of 'union of states' or 'a low-level federation'.[4] But such an agreement will hardly be carried out if left to the authorities themselves. Even a confederative structure that leaves two sovereign states in existence will not

offer a sufficient guarantee for the self-preservation of the North Korean regime and it is moreover in the nature of governments everywhere, including both Koreas, to desire either reunification on their own terms or else the status quo, and not to relish the prospect of handing over even a small portion of their power to organs of the confederation.

All the same, while carrying on the process of reconciliation, cooperation and reintegration to meet the real needs of the people on both sides, we need a minimum institutional device to manage the dangers of that process. Provided that the only possible answer lies in a union of states or a loose confederation, there is for the moment no one besides 'the third party' to actively study and promote this project, nor will it be possible, without large-scale participation by it, to prepare the ground for such a confederation through various inter-Korean contacts and networks in every field.

Finally, in lieu of a conclusion, I will briefly discuss the role of Koreans abroad. As the space for civilian efforts for reunification and for direct contact between North and South Koreans has expanded under the '87 regime, and particularly after June 2000, we have come to depend less on devoted activists in the diaspora in the struggle against dictatorship and for national reconciliation. Moreover, once the building of a confederation emerges as the central agenda, the Korean diaspora can hardly be expected to play a role equal to that of the residents of the peninsula, since the confederation will be a confederation of the two Korean states, not a tripartite union of North, South and the diaspora. As a Resident Korean activist in Japan has put it, "the overseas Koreans will be the subjects of reunification like any other Korean, but the leading role must belong to the North and the South."

But precisely such a situation opens up the way for broad and diverse popular participation overseas as much as in South Korea during the 'Age of June 15'. Without having to gird themselves for superhuman self-sacrifice, ordinary people can contribute towards the reunification process the experiences, visions and influences on the scene unavailable to the population of the peninsula, while remaining true to their daily lives in their respective places of residence or citizenship. This will be particularly true of the Korean and Korean-American communities in the United States, by their very presence in the most powerful nation on earth and with the wealth of outstanding talent among them. Their contribution will not only enrich the content of Korean-style reunification, but the project of building a global network of Koreans will become all the more meaningful as a result. They will also contribute in no negligible measure to making the future human civilization a more just and diverse world.

Notes:

[1] See David Harvey, A Brief History of Neoliberalism (Oxford University Press 2005).
[2] The literature on this topic is quite scanty in Western languages. My essay, "Habermas on National Unification in Germany and Korea," New Left Review 1/219, Sept./Oct. 1996, may serve as a convenient introduction in English. Readers of Japanese may consult the Japanese edition of my book The Shaking Division System: Peku Nakuchong (Paik Nak-chung), Chosen hanto toitsu ron - yuragu bundan taisei (Tokyo: Kurein, 2001).
[3] See Paik Nak-chung, "The Reunification Movement and Literature" (1989), especially the section 'Perspectives on the Period after the June Uprising', pp. 202-7, in Kenneth M. Wells, ed., South Korea's Minjung Movement: The Culture and Politics of Dissidence (University of Hawaii Press 1995.
[4] It is noteworthy that while Pyongyang clings to the term yonbang (the Korean word for 'federation') its official English translation calls

for a 'Koryo Democratic Confederal [rather than Federal] Republic'.

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