
Morality and Legitimacy in the Sewöl Protest in South Korea

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When the Sewöl Ferry sank in 2014, leaving 304 dead and 9 missing passengers, South Korea was shocked and grieving. The mass mourning soon turned into extensive anti-government protests. First, the activists focused on collecting 10,000,000 signatures on petitions to change the law in order to enable proper investigation, punishment of those found guilty, and redrafting of safety and rescue regulations. Later, in the winter of 2016 the protests extended and called for the impeachment of the former president, Pak Kün-hye (Park Geun-hye). She was eventually impeached in March 2017, in what came to be called the ‘bittersweet victory for families of Sewol ferry victims’ (Griffiths and Han 2017). Mourning the death of so many youths has created a momentum of civic action along enduring debates over governance transparency, morality and policy. Moreover, this protest showed that democratic actions could overcome even the authority of Pak, which stemmed from both tradition — she was the daughter of a legendary (albeit disputed) president — and the law, as a democratically chosen leader. She, however, lacked charisma, a main trait of the authority types categorized by Max Weber (1947). Much of Pak’s blame in relation to the Sewöl Ferry’s sinking can indeed be discussed in terms of lack of charisma. She did not act as the trustworthy leader that Korea wanted to see during such a national crisis.

While South Korea has often been described a homogeneous nation, I argue that complex relationships between social classes create urban clashes. In the Sewöl movement, multitudes of individuals joined forces to demand justice over government actions that they deemed illegitimate. The prevailing assumption, that ruling and economic élites cooperated to silence the reasons for the tragic sinking, created multiple conspiracy theories about corruption. These rumours empowered the protesters and resulted in the formation of a broad social legitimacy and participation in their struggle. The protest camp allowed strangers to build a sense of mutual understanding and attachment of the kind that Yael Navaro calls serendipitous (2017: 212) even while living in a metropolis like Seoul. The Sewöl protesters were aware of the legal system’s power and limited their dissent to legal actions with hopes of changing some existing laws in order to bring about the desired societal changes.

The Sewöl sank in April 16, 2014. It soon became clear that the ferry was not handled, maintained, or supervised properly. The media accused different government ministries for that situation, and many blamed the president personally for not supervising the rescue operation well. The spontaneous demonstrations became a semi-permanent protest camp that since 2014 the mayor of Seoul has allowed to stay in Kwanghwamun Square. Two years later, in 2016, when the alleged corruption of the president were exposed by the media, the demonstrations became massive, and their impact stronger. The public dissent in Seoul reached its height in the winter of 2016-7. At that time, more than one million people attended every Saturday the night’s candle vigil protest in Kwanghwamun Square. Many protesters felt

that the impeachment of Pak would not have materialized had they ceased to attract the public's attention and exert pressure on policy makers through demonstrations and social media campaigns. In the impeachment motion, the president's misconduct pertaining to the Sewöl Ferry's sinking was discussed in detail, although she was not specifically blamed for breaking the disobeying law.

In an extended forthcoming work (Sarfati 2018), I analyse the events and public opinion shifts that led to these mass protests. There, after a brief discussion of the history of protests in downtown Seoul, I discuss three cases that demonstrate how questions of morality and legitimacy became central to the rage against former president Pak and her government. The development of the protests and their outcome emerges from these cases in their chronological order of occurrence, beginning with summer 2014, when, as testified by the first case-study, volunteers dedicated immense efforts to collect signatures on a petition to change the law in order to enable a proper investigation of the Ferry's sinking. The second case-study brings out the distress of the bereaved families and their supporters when the ministry of education decided to clear both the drowned students' classrooms of their personal effects and many commemorative installations. The third case details the impeachment demonstrations; here the power of this dissent movement is revealed through vivid instances of criticism and anger, as well as verbal iterations of the perceived immorality of former president Pak Kūn-hye's behaviour.

The ethnography documents the strong tendency to construct public opinions in urban Korea on assessments of morality, humanity, and responsibility, rather than on legality and formal conduct codes. It shows how the former president failed in a key task of governance; that is, 'to establish and nurture the connection with citizens' values, needs and expectations, the strength of which depends upon the observable quality of the link between political responsibility and trust and authority in the exercise of power' (Pardo and Prato 2010: 1). When I recorded some of the protesters' narratives, the speakers would ask me to conceal their identities, fearing persecution by the authorities. While they spoke freely in front of people who they met a short while before in the camp, their trust of the world outside the dissent movement was dropping. Their mistrust in their president and government often stemmed from the poor treatment of the bereaved families. The president did not meet them individually to express condolences, nor was there enough official support for the families' commemoration projects.

The empty classrooms of the 250 high-school students that were among the victims of this tragedy have turned into spontaneous community commemoration spaces when acquaintances created small altars for each student's spirit by placing food items, flowers, photographs and personal notes on the deserted desks. In 2016, the local education ministry decided to begin reusing these classrooms. Dismantling the desk-altars, while lawful, was received as immoral by the bereaved families and their supporters, and reignited the civil unrest around the Sewöl issue. The dissent was dominated by the feeling that these tragic deaths would be less painful had significant changes in society occurred as a result. Therefore, the commemoration venues are deemed to be crucial not only as sites for individual mourning

but also as a constant reminder of the harm that negligence and lack of proper safety laws can cause.

Conflicting moralities often mark the relationship between economic goals and personal safety. In the Korean case, the president was viewed as responsible for these two goals. As a leader, she should have managed the demands of large business conglomerates for the country's economic prosperity, while at the same time taking care of laws and regulations that would allow personal safety for all. These two issues are in conflict because safety regulations are financially costly and are, therefore, often objected to by business owners. In the Sewōl ferry's case, had the state made sure that every ferry must pass a real inspection before leaving port, the cargo in the ferry would probably not have been allowed to travel unfastened, which caused the disaster. Moreover, the hired staff would not have been allowed to sail without proper emergency training, and the rescue operation would not have been fully handed over to a private, unsupervised company (You and Park 2017). President Pak was personally accused to be responsible for these fatal shortcomings, and she did little to appease the public in the few public speeches she gave on the topic. The protesters have been well aware of the power of law. They have used lawyer advisors and have worked mostly within the boundaries of the law to advance their cause. However, much of the discourse around the Sewōl affair has regarded morality as more important than simply a matter of obeying the law.

As the political life of Korea continued, the recent elections demonstrated the power of the Sewōl protests in forming a new era of South Korea's ruling élite. On 9 May 2017 Mun Jae-In, a liberal candidate who was not related to the right-wing president Pak, won the elections. In one of the latest election speeches, he declared that he would be 'the president who never forgets Sewōl as long as there is spring and as long as April comes every year'. He promised he would work to reveal the whole truth about the sinking and make Korea a safer country. Symbolically, right before the elections he chose Kwanghwamun Square for his last president election campaign speech.

The Sewōl protests and the subsequent impeachment offer a fertile ethnographic field to examine how urban environments host public dissent and how democratic governance handles such situations. Moreover, it demonstrates how the way in which the public perceive the boundaries of their leaders' responsibilities do not necessarily overlap with those set by formal law. Therefore, anti-corruption protests can start even in the absence of proven law breaking. Indeed, the accumulated emotions of various individuals can affect the ruling élite and generate significant social change, as has happened in Seoul during the past three years.

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