

The frailty of liberalism and its political consequences in democratized Korea

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1. Why does liberalism in Korea matter?

1) This presentation aims to give a sketch on the role and profile of liberalism in Korean society, particularly in the context of democratic practices. As compared with other ideologies, political ideas, political thoughts or political movements, including nationalism, neo-liberalism, socialism, or social democracy, and even republicanism, discussions on liberalism have been scarce. Democracy and liberalism have developed historically interlinked and have maintained a mutually complementary relationship, although their relationship has not always been smooth. That is, the development of democracy would lead to strengthen liberalism and vice versa. Based on the experiences and practices of democracy in Korean society, however, such a phenomenon has hardly been identified. Some political theorists do not think that there is an essential link between democracy and liberalism. In other words, they have strong doubts that for its development democracy needs such a foundational political idea as liberalism. This view seems quite convincing because the two ideas and values, institutions and practices have had entirely different roots and developmental pathways. And if democracy requires liberalism as a precondition for its development, many other countries outside the Western world lacking the tradition of liberalism would have found it very difficult, if not impossible, to develop democracy.

2) Nevertheless, the Korean experiences of democracy are telling us that we may find from liberalism a practical reasoning or general direction that would help to solve some central problems and troubles arising from democratic practices. When democracy is defined in a most simplistic way it is nothing more than a political regime type with a set of rules and institutions, including fair and regular election, equal political participation, elected government, voluntary associations, and so forth. Yet how democracy as these minimum procedures operates in reality is extremely complex. That is not merely an institutional question of how good a set of rules is. How it works, how much democratic ideals and values through its institutional practices are realized requires many other conditions, socio-economic, behavioral, moral, cultural, and so forth. In order to function well democracy needs to have a condition, or a necessary quality, not only institutional but also moral, under which a broad moral consensus makes political conflicts and passions possible to be compromised and tamed.

3) From a point of view of composition of, and relationships among, social actors or social groups that practice democracy and make it actually working, democratization in Korea is a building of political framework in which two social groups, originated from deep historical and political cleavages since liberation in 1945 and even going further back to the past, peacefully coexist and make a national goal based on a broadly- agreed moral consensus. We may most roughly define these two groups in ideological division as the conservatives and the progressives, or the right and the left. While the former had built the establishment under the *ancien regime* before democratization, the latter is the new generations of social and political actor which had played a central role in bringing about democracy during the 1980s. These two groups are not necessarily distinguished from each other by age groups. They are

deeply divided by ideology, political ideas, values, and passions which have imbued each of them with a different set of viewing the contemporary Korea's political history, South/North relationships, the role of the U.S. in the Korean peninsula, and capitalist market economy. In this sense Korean society is characterized by the polarization of ideology and political culture. Democratization in South Korea has virtually little produced positive results on these matters caused by the ideological schism, with the deep historical root. I would like to suppose a common ground that would have been achieved in the democratized Korean society. Nevertheless, it, by and large, leaves a space in the middle widely empty- a space, I mean, for liberalism.

Many people both inside and outside Korean society tend to see that Korea is a model case of success in the developing countries in the two crucially important aspects of social change, democratization and industrialization. For Koreans including myself there is absolutely no reason to complain about such a positive national image and assessment. However, such a view is likely to be merely shedding light on the surface of phenomena. It would more or less overlook what problems Korean society really faces. First, concerning industrialization what is most evidently telling is that under the authoritarian state's tutelage it never provides a self-sufficient and self-sustaining developmental model. It is because the authoritarian industrialization in Korea had generated an equally powerful social force in favor of democracy against the authoritarian rule within the political system of authoritarianism and against a particular way of industrialization as its social base. In the same vein with respect to democratization, Korea's democracy is far behind from the level Western countries have achieved. These two competing social groups mainly involved in each of these two processes, industrialization on the one hand, democratization on the other, are forced to accommodate themselves to democratic politics. The role of liberalism is found in this context.

2. The Korea's right/ conservatives from the perspective of liberalism

1) Historically viewed, there was found an apparent contradiction in the historical role of the Korea's conservatives in the making of a separate government. They were centrally engaged in making the separate state which to realize democracy as the regime type as well as liberalism as the basic political doctrine establishing values and norms. Achieving those values and ideas and institutions was the state goal and *the raison d'etat* of the separate state. But at that time the Korean people who supported the separation of the state knew that the anti-communism was more urgent; under the circumstances the realization of liberal democracy was not possible without the realizing national security and internal political stability. I would say, therefore, there were two processes, materializing liberal democracy and building an anticommunist bulwark, and they were virtually identical. The dilemma was that the separate state builders should consolidate the political order and stability of the regime by making it a solid anticommunist bulwark prior to building liberal democracy. It, however, actually meant displacement of a goal; while the ultimate goal of the newly created state was the establishment of liberal democracy, the means to attain it was Cold War anti-communism. In reality, the goal and its means were displaced. Also, it accompanied an obvious discrepancy between reality and rhetoric, and between formal institutions and practices. For the conservatives real problem is that they hardly become a genuine promoter and practitioner for democracy and liberalism rather than for the Cold War anti-communism and authoritarianism at the time after the political upheavals and turmoil subsided and politics returned to a normal state. Therefore, we had to wait for a long time the growth of a quite different social force that was fully committed to struggles for democracy.

2) The second generation of conservatives grew up with authoritarian industrialization under the Park Chung Hee government, which became widely known as "the Park Chung Hee developmental model" enunciated in a model of the "developmental state". As compared with the previous authoritarian rule of the First Republic during the early Cold War years, which was largely "negative" in terms of the state role in running economy, Park Chung Hee's developmental state was very positive in every aspect of economic management. But Korea's developmental state was a typically military technocratic authoritarian rule, and thereby resembled the typical pre-war Japanese developmental state, not a post-war version, which was neither compatible with liberalism nor with democracy. That firmly stood in extreme opposition to democracy and liberalism. On the basis of the previous authoritarian rule under the civilian control, the layers of authoritarianism were further thickened. The maximal and technocratic state based on the strongly built, highly centralized state bureaucracy laid down a strong state infrastructure, entailing a strong consciousness of statism and the values of efficient goal attainment and effective and efficient implementation of a national goal. Through this historical sequence the state-centeredness not only at the ideological level but also at the institutional and infrastructural levels firmly took root in Korean society. Some structural constraints that would restrain the development of civil society and liberalism were laid down.

3) The other side of the developmental state is the growth of economically powerful *chaebol*, big business conglomerates. Though economically powerful, however, they are unfortunately a politically weak and dependent species. They are weak and dependent not in terms of the size of business, their role and influence in the private economic sector, and their contribution to the growth of national wealth, but in terms of their relationships with the state. In Korea, as in pre-war Japan, the state, not the industrial bourgeoisie, was historically the initiator and leader of the industrialization process. Above all, the *chaebol* were the state concessionaries, if not state creations, throughout the period from liberation to the years of the state-led industrialization. Comparing the *chaebol* with the *yangban* aristocracy, the ruling elite in the traditional Chosun dynasty that wielded hegemony with huge influence over both the state and society, an eminent American scholar of Korean history assessed that even if they had big influence in economy and politics, the *chaebol*, the representative of Korea's modern business elite, do not enjoy hegemony. It is because even if they played the historical role in generating national wealth they failed to champion revolutionary values of economic and political freedom that have had a great popular appeal. (Carter J. Eckert, "The South Korean Bourgeoisie: A Class in Search of Hegemony", in Hagen Koo, ed., *State and Society in Contemporary Korea* (Cornell University Press, 1993)).

Korea's big businesses are entirely different from the "conquering bourgeoisie," their Western counterpart. In short, they are neither initiators nor promoters of democracy and liberalism. Economic and political power do not in themselves constitute or assure the hegemony of any group or class in a given society. Public criticism to the conglomerates has been long vocal and often severe. They have been extremely reluctant to abide by law and have not shown respect for the rule of law, and they failed to give a sense of fairness through legitimate earning of profits. Even in the age of globalization attending the emphasis of market efficiency, market competition, and the ideology of market fundamentalism, some people are still wondering whether the Korean conglomerates are earning the profits and accumulating wealth through market competition rather than making efforts for easy money making through special relationships with political power. For the *chaebol* to become independent vis-à-vis the state, it is crucial that they become hegemonic, and are able to

imbue themselves with the values and norms of liberalism in order for the development of Korean democracy.

3. The Korea's left/ progressives from the perspective of liberalism

1) In the contemporary Korean politics, political and ideological schism originated from one predominant cleavage in the early cold war years; that is, the national question – as we may call it – deriving from the issue of separate state making. Therefore, the right and left have a common origin. Even after the right and left finally turned out to be the winner and loser, respectively, the conflict was so intense that it left a long protracted legacy on later patterns of the political and ideological conflicts. These conflicts have evolved by developing the most simplified way of dichotomous thinking and political judgment. I would say that, on the left, liberal democracy was disclaimed from the beginning mainly for two reasons. First, the left didn't believe that controversies over liberal democracy as a regime type for the new separate state arose from reality; instead, they believed that the real issue was about whether or not people should support the separation of the nation. For the people who opposed the nation's separation, the real issue was how people could hold national unity, identity and integration regardless of regime type. Here nationalism could not but become the overwhelmingly dominant political ideal, values and norms, with a strong emotional calling to patriotism. It is a political ideology carrying a strong sense of moral superiority by whose criterion people can judge who should be qualified to take national leadership and who were more committed to preventing the nation's division and realizing the nation's reunification. Second, they thought that liberal democracy was usurped by the conservatives who had been pursuing the separation of the state. The left could not swallow the word of liberalism and democracy that such ideological languages were no more than a rhetoric and ideological slogan for legitimizing the power holders of the authoritarian regime backed by the United States. For the left, therefore, nationalism was the political idea and thought associating "real" democracy with reunification against the backdrop of the Cold War anticommunism. Some scholars who study German history say that the weakness of bourgeoisie in the prewar Germany caused liberalism not to robustly develop there and thereby brought about "liberalism by intellectuals". But in Korea there have been no chances for even "liberalism by intellectuals" to take root.

2) During the late 1970s and the 1980s the massive popular movement for democracy took place accompanying the development of *minjung* movement and discourse. And the *minjung* movement revived to a great extent ethos, passion, and utopian ideology and combined them with contemporary radical theories. In my view the *minjung* movement was driven by an "emotive radicalism" incorporating traditional communitarian ethos, romantic revolutionary nationalism, and holistic vision of social change, rather than by more realistic progressive theories, visions and programs. Although the movement forces played a central role in bringing about democracy they were utterly inept in accommodating themselves to become a playing as important a role under the political conditions after democratization, including elections, political parties and the running of government as they did in the movement for democracy. They understood democracy as a continuation of the movement and thereby as a maximalist democracy with a holistic vision of political reforms supported by a revolutionary means with emancipatory passion. This way of understanding democracy is not so well fitted to political practices through democratic institutions within the ideational framework of minimalist democracy that is feasible and practical. For the movement-turned- democratic

citizens, their understanding democracy was quite different from the Madisonian democracy. As a consequence, anti-institutional bias among them was conspicuous.

3) After the Asian financial crisis that brought about the IMF bailout, globalization and the neo-liberal doctrine became the central forces in not only the Korean government's economic policy and broader policy directions over all the social spheres, but it also became the central axis dividing between pro and con, and the right and left. This schism created an important side effect in response to liberalism. For many people there was no difference between liberalism and neo-liberalism; the former was a mere extension of the latter in the latest stage of capitalist market economy. In my view, however, each of them is a different species owing to two respects. First, liberalism is a political idea and principle that defines a particular type of state and civil society relationships, designating an organizing principle of the state and civil society relationship whereby the primacy is granted to civil society over the state. On the contrary, neoliberalism, a much narrower ideology, is basically an economic doctrine and broadly speaking, a kind of latest version of (right) libertarianism.

Second, liberalism has developed with an emphasis on individual liberty both of inner self's mind and conscience (including religious and political beliefs) and from restraints by external authority, either state or group, as well as with emphasis on the spontaneity and naturalness of community development and social changes. On the contrary, with the exclusive emphasis on the efficiency of unregulated market economy, neoliberalism is a quite radical economic ideology supported by the state policy and intervention rather than seeking the balance between liberal market and community's ethical life as we see in Adam Smith's economic and moral theories. Seen from this perspective liberalism is much more progressive as an idea and thought. During the period of highly industrialized society in Korea, individualized and democratized people were not fully exposed to liberalism, one of few major modern political ideas.

4) There is an interesting paradox in the right/left division in Korean society and politics. There has been observed a convergence between these conflicting forces- a convergence toward nationalist, collectivist and anti-liberal kind of ideological tendencies combined with statism, developmentalism, and economic nationalism. During the 1950s, at the peak of the cold war, nationalism was considered by the government authorities a radical, even a subversive, ideology, and thus they prohibited it from being spoken in public sphere. The reason is why nationalism was understood as a radical progressive ideology that disavowed the legitimacy of separate government in the South and the U.S. role in the Korean peninsula and that placed national unification as the supreme national goal. On the contrary, since the 1970s-80s everybody, the left and right, became nationalist in common. The ideological and discursive climate is completely changed. How did this convergence toward nationalism happen? The state-centered economic development and industrialization is the linkage factor. Now the core element of nationalism is the state-centrism, economic nationalism and national reunification supported from both side, the right and the left.

An able Korean-American scholar who studies Korea's *minjung* movement keenly observed that even if the movement that immersed itself with the elitist "mandarin culture" had been strongly influenced by Marxism-Leninism, "the *minjung* project as a whole never categorically disavowed the modern notion of nation- state or capitalist development... their emancipatory imaginary stayed within the received notion of nation-state." (Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea* (Cornell University Press, 2007)). Although the radical left had the origin in the radical *minjung* movement of the 1980s their rhetoric and attitudes do not automatically mean that they are

really as radical as they appear. Discrepancy between radical rhetoric and ideological orientation on the one hand and their actual values and behaviors on the other would rather make people feel relieved. But it is quite doubtful that how much such ideological and attitudinal tendencies is germane to the condition in which liberalism evolves.

4. The central issues that liberalism can bring about some positive effects

1) The mode of operation of the state bureaucracy

Without a state that is strongly institutionalized and well functioning, the consolidation of new democracy and political reforms can not be possible. What we emphasize, however, is that the centrality of a well-functioning state is not the same thing as the structure and tradition of the strong state to weaken liberal values and norms and constrain a robust development of democracy. Being called a strong state, or an "overgrown state" in the past years, the state in Korea had been highly centralized and bureaucratized throughout the periods of the authoritarian regime. How, with the regime change to democracy, the previous authoritarian state apparatuses can be democratized and how the state officials can be imbued with new democratic and liberal norms and values were prioritized in essential reform agendas for democratization. But the authoritarian legacies die hard. Substantive changes in authoritarian bureaucratic apparatuses and their behavioral norms have slowly taken place after democratization.

Whether or not a democratically elected government respects democratic principles and fully undertakes accountability to the citizens directly affects the behaviors of state officials who are in charge of running government agencies. If some of the former repressive apparatuses of the state, notably including the judicial and police agencies, expand its functions and powers in a manner with which the citizens were quite familiar during the authoritarian rule, fear among people about the revival of the authoritarian rule will unmistakably rise. Currently such a thing becomes a reality. The case is found recently in the current government's way of handling the protest movements after the massive candlelight demonstrations in the early 2008 as well as handling the criticisms against the government policies by the critical mass media and internet media. What I am saying here is about the febleness of liberalism in Korean society as the underlying values and norms with which to sustain democratic institutions. Basic principles and norms for democracy including individual security, individual rights, and freedom of the press, which can not be violated or deprived by a government policy in the name of majority rule.

Recently I have watched how the American society handles the interrogation methods used on the terrorist suspects during the past Bush administration. What struck me is that liberal norms and values put enormous moral restraints on the way in which the government deals with even such an urgent national security issue. In Korean society the national security issue is considered an imperative; the issue is so important that it could not be overridden by any other principles and norms, even those of democracy and liberalism, and that the ends and means are hardly allowed to be distinguished. By contrast, in American society the restraints in working out the means, despite the broad consensus about the goal, are brought by political and social pressures not only from mass media, public opinion, party and Congress, but also from within the inner circle of top policy makers in the national security issue .

2) Constitutional Structure and Its Actual Working

The Korean constitution, modeled after the American constitution, is based on the principle of separation of power and the checks and balances among the three branches of

government. The spirit of the constitution making, however, makes a big difference not in the formal structure of institutions but in its actual working. In America there were two pillars buttressing the American system: one is the primacy of legislative body over the executive and the other is the independence of judicial branch granted the authority which to interpret constitution. By contrast, in Korea the supremacy of the executive branch over the legislative body and the judiciary, with almost no independence from the executive, is the chief characteristic in the actual mode of operation of the government power.

The American constitution, so-called the Madisonian constitution, now provides an ideal model to almost all other countries which adopt the presidential system. The Korean version of the Madisonian constitution has been transformed in its practices and operation through the long authoritarian rule and the recent experiences of democracy as well, while retaining its basic formal structure throughout the period. The problem in post-authoritarian Korea is its characteristic feature of balance of power among the three branches during the authoritarian rule, with the executive supremacy in little checks and balances with the other two. Such continuity is not because democratic consolidation is insufficient but because liberalism in Korean society is fragile. In the Madisonian constitution, the rationale for the making of the American federal government had been derived from seemingly contradictory goals: one is building a government that protects citizen's individual rights and liberty and to realize popular sovereignty through representation, while the other is limiting the government's power. This is the reason why the legislative branch as the citizens' representative body is the first branch of government over the executive and the judiciary.

In Korea, however, the state from the beginning was perceived as the institutional representation of national community, its being immanently legitimate and also the means to achieve national goal. There is the executive office at its center. The state-centeredness is causally connected to the executive supremacy. It was the state that defines what is the national goal; it was also the state that has carried out it with a maximum effectiveness and efficiency. In these processes there have been to a great extent authoritarian tendencies in the mode of operations of the governmental powers and totalitarian tendencies in the way of which social and ideological resources were mobilized in to attain the goal. Under the circumstances there have been few concerns from both the left and the right about an unchecked executive power, the state power in general. In Korea the evolution of the Madisonian democracy in terms of institutional structure has not entailed the Madisonian spirit.

3) Weak liberal spirit in Korea's civil society

In the Western societies, civil society and liberalism evolved side by side with the rise of commercial society in the macro-historical change to modernity. By contrast, in Korea civil society emerged as the site of popular political movement for democracy. The setting and the guiding spirit in which civil society emerged in Western societies and Korean society were quite different. In Korea the discourse of civil society emerged with rise of the *minjung* movement that tended to understand democratization as a moral movement. The moral contents the *minjung* movement envisioned democracy incorporating something compounded, if not synthesized, of ethos, visions, values and norms derived from communitarian, nationalistic, socialistic, idealistic, utopian ideas and ideologies, some traditional and some modern.

Recently some progressive intellectuals in the tradition of the *minjung* movement emphasize the resuscitation of the movement for democracy and downplay or criticize representative democracy, ascribing the disappointment or disenchantment about the elected governments as well as democracy in general to the limits of liberal representative democracy

and the failure of its principal mechanisms like elections and political parties. Instead, they uphold direct democracy and republicanism that were drawn from the political ideas, institutions and practices in the ancient Greece and Rome. In short, they emphasize the morality in politics and the ethical life in civil society free from corruption, greed, foolhardiness, and injustice of capitalist market economy, social disintegration and so forth-- free from all of those things which were brought by neoliberalism. And thereby they put on citizens a heavier moral obligation. Such a political vision or political conception would like to bring some negative consequences to the political practices of democracy.

While emphasizing the moral approach to politics and market economy and the citizens's ethical life, they repudiate private interests, social cleavages and political conflict. And they don't see that common goods/interests are composed of various particular/private interests, or a constitutive conception, not something predetermined bestowed by someone from an intellectually higher position or something transcendental free from interest conflicts. Therefore, they don't see that common interest is differently and temporarily defined and is changed to different contents according to political conflicts and compromises. This conception of interest-based political conflicts is the conceptual foundation for democratic politics in which political parties play a central role. The emphasis on the ethical life in the *minjung* discourse seems to be not quite convincing because it is not based on real society. In the meantime, the ethical life discourses have been emphasized by both the progressives and the conservatives, bringing nothing fruitful in making some contributions to reinvigorating moral values in real social life. In the meantime the state continues to retain its predominant influence over civil society. That is to say, civil society that once offered the political base for democracy does little to play a role in limiting the state both in terms of distributing and allocating social and economic values and resources and powers and in terms of defining national goals and interests.

4) Extending liberalism to incorporating social rights

One of the strengths of liberalism as a political thought is resilience and adaptability to political and social changes. Its contents and theories are not circumscribed within the theoretical originators or leading theorists. Recently a new study of liberalism presents a thought provoking interpretation through a historicist and contextual approach by shedding light on the dynamic aspects of formation and transformation of liberalism. (Andreas Kalyvas and Ira Katznelson, *Liberal Beginnings: Making a Republic for the Moderns* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)). According to this study liberalism finally came out from the dead end that republicanism faced under the circumstances the common good/general will can no longer be imposed on the citizens in the commercialized society. So the study presents a convincing conclusion that republicanism and liberalism were not drawn from different roots, reversing the widely accepted knowledge that liberalism and republicanism have a different genealogy, and draws an entirely new conclusion that liberalism emerged from the womb of republicanism and so has no separate origin from the latter.

In the same vein, we may ask about the latest state of liberalism. What about the liberalism at the stage of the mature capitalist market economy? Now liberalism would incorporate social rights and welfare state. Many staunch proponents of liberalism already have emphasized this aspect of liberalism. In Korea some sections of the *minjung* movement and the labor movement have argued for universal social welfare system, equal distribution, extension of workers' rights without political restraints and exclusion, and realization of social justice. For their cause, the radical sections of labor movement presuppose a certain grand economic system that is, though not clearly defined, something closer to a variant of the traditional social democracy or anti-capitalist market economy. They cherish a quite

negative attitude toward representative democracy and political party and are unequivocally hostile to liberalism as well. But I would like to say that liberalism can espouse social aspects including social rights and welfare. But my view is derived from quite a different view from what the radical labor movement has envisaged. Quite the contrary, social rights, social welfare, and labor rights and interests would be understood in the context of liberal democracy and market economy, no matter how much regulated, and that they should be approached and solved in that political framework, principally party politics. What I mean here is that liberalism at the political level can be extended to social norms and values by substantively incorporating some central elements of social democracy at the another level, that is, economic system.

5. Conclusion

Some 20 years after the transition to democracy in Korea the role and space liberalism can offer appear more clearly than ever before. Democracy since then has failed to dampen the right/left ideological schism, which is historically rooted in the early years of separate state making. And neither the right nor the left fully satisfies us in providing a convincing alternative vision of how democracy in Korean society can robustly develop and thereby enhance its quality. While the right/conservatives continue to retain their predominant power and influence over the state and civil society, they have stuck to the old fashioned, outmoded black and white ideology derived from the coldwar period. That ideology can no longer provide a political vision and values and norms pertinent to the post-coldwar era as well as a democratized, highly modernized and globalized social environment. Thereby they have failed to play a leading role in enhancing autonomy of civil society vis-à-vis the state, respecting rule of law, and contributing to bringing social integration and inclusiveness.

On the other side, the leftists have disappointed many people who expected that the entirely new generations which appeared on the political center stage in the course of democratization could play a decisive role in changing politics. In recent years we have witnessed the growing disillusionment with the radical discourses and ideas as well as with their inability to develop a new type of party politics, deal with the social economic questions and provide a certain substantive model for ethical life.

Under these circumstances recognizing liberalism is somewhat belated when we consider that democracy and liberalism made an early appearance side by side in Korean society at the time of separate state making. Therefore, in the beginning, liberalism in Korean society was external to the people's collective experiences through the enormous turmoils and upheavals in the Korea's contemporary history. But now liberalism finds its role in an internal need in Korean society. It is because liberalism as a political doctrine and political principle is now needed to make democracy function robustly. That provides an ideational space in which the right and left are able to conjoin, thereby transforming unresolvable conflicts to more or less resolvable ones within the institutional framework of democracy and making a contribution to building a moral base for ethical life.

As I have more specifically discussed above, liberalism is believed to offer the political principle and the values and norms in some crucially important areas for the development of democracy, including limiting the abuse of state/ executive power, preventing the backlash to authoritarianism, enhancing autonomy of civil society, protecting individual rights and liberty, and extending individual rights and welfare to socially and economically alienated groups. In short, liberalism might help to bring about a free and inclusive political community in Korean society.