Participatory Democracy or National Schism?
Online Political Communication and Shifting Modes of Activism in South Korea

South Korea has a rich history of popular political movements. Previously under authoritarian rule, mass movements were crucial to promoting political change. Thereafter, civil society activities continued as a distinguishing feature of South Korea’s democracy. More recently, the candlelight movement in 2016-17 contributed to the impeachment of former President Park Geun-hye. In 2019, Seoul witnessed another wave of demonstrations requesting for prosecution reform.

Reviewing South Korea’s history of mass social movements, Dr Kim Hyejin, lecturer at the Department of Political Science and the Global Studies Programme, National University of Singapore, draws attention to a shift in the modes of activism in the country. She argues that the nature of civic engagement has changed fundamentally in the last 20 years, informed particularly by specific ways of using the internet. At the same time, while the new style of civic engagement is distinct from the old, spirit of the traditional style of activism has infused new activism via the internet.

The traditional style of activism involved vertical interactions such that traditional social movements were developed within association groups and messages were disseminated via in-person meetings. They were also hierarchical in nature, with the elders giving advice to juniors. In contrast, the new style of activism is based on horizontal interaction. Activists are connected via online portals. They may discussed a single issue with open-ended responses, on a more equal basis, and in community-like setting. The hierarchy in terms of age and social status breaks apart to give room for more diverse discussions.

The internet has played an important role in supporting the new style of activism. Nevertheless, it can work both ways, as an agency of democracy and utilised by autocrats to distract citizens from certain agenda. Dr Kim therefore posits that history has been crucial for developing the repertoires of collective action that made the internet a place for critical citizen engagement. The “fighting spirit” of predecessors and earlier modes of social movements have served as inspirations and lessons to the latter ones.

In the case of South Korea, when traditional media were suppressed by the state in the 1990s and journalists eventually turned to the internet, developing their own podcasts and blogs. This allowed them to put forth their political opinions and news to the audience easily, and such channels of communication have gained popularity. Even today, most of the highly popular podcasts are related to political news. These channels still play an important role in creating frames for political discussions online, showing how the country’s history continues to motivate activism in the new era.

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