

From Collective Action to Impeachment: Political Opportunities of the Candlelight Protests in South Korea

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Candlelight protests were held in 2016 and 2017 in South Korea. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered downtown with candles in their hands, and it is widely recognized as an unprecedented collective action in the history of Korean politics. This study analyzes how the candlelight protests developed and achieved the impeachment of the president. Drawing on political opportunity theory, this paper examines how the political opportunity was formulated in the process and outcome of these candlelight protests. This paper identifies three properties that served as enabling conditions embedded in this case: (1) political freedoms guaranteed in the existing formal institutions; (2) political elites in alignment with the protesters and the rule of law; and (3) low risk of state repression of law-abiding collective action. Overall, the political opportunities were sufficiently established in Korean society for citizens to take collective action and their protests led to the desired outcome.

Key Words: Candlelight Protest, Impeachment, Political Opportunities, Democracy

I. Introduction

South Korea (hereinafter Korea) has been through political turmoil over the last decades, from dictatorship, through a military-authoritarian government, to democracy with a multi-party system. The country has achieved rapid socio-political development, and citizens have become more vocal and active in taking various forms of political action. According to the Freedom in the World report annually published by Freedom House, Korea is currently labeled as 'free' with a score of 83 out of 100 (Freedom

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House 2020). However, putting the overall assessment of Korean democracy aside, this paper begins by paying attention to the historically unprecedented case of the candlelight protests.

In late October 2016, a massive number of Korean citizens took to the main squares of Seoul and other cities, holding candles in their hands. These candlelight protests (*chot-bul-si-wi*) was ignited by the political scandal about the president's breach of duty and illegitimate state management in conspiracy with her long-time confidante, Choi Soon-sil, a powerful unofficial aide.¹ The protests ended with the impeachment of the president, which was the first time since the establishment of the constitutional government in Korea. The case drew a considerable amount of not only domestic but also international attention because it was held in peace and led to the impeachment of the president as the protesters demanded.

Several pieces of research have focused on investigating political opportunities in different areas in Korea, including democratization in the 1980s (Choe and Kim 2011; Yun 1997), environmental movements (Ku 2010), labor movements (Suh 2001), and civil society organizations (Fioramonti and Fiori 2010). Since this unprecedented candlelight protest case swept through the country, a considerable amount of literature has been published on its socio-political processes and key variables (Alemán 2019; Chon 2018; Heo and Yoon 2018; Hong 2018; Kang 2019; Kim 2017; Lee 2017, 2018, 2019; Min and Yun 2019; Roh and Yang 2017; Soh, Yu, and Connolly 2018; Turner, Kwon, and O'Donnell 2018). Heo and Yoon (2018) adopt political opportunity theory to interpret the candlelight protests, finding that the political structure was an important external trigger of the expansion of the protest. While their study endeavors to identify the significance of external conditions in the emergence of the candlelight protest, it insufficiently discusses the dynamics of state agencies and citizens within the given institutions over the entire process, spanning the protests to the impeachment. As a process-oriented approach is imperative to understanding the developments of collective political action and its influence on the overall political opportunities for mobilization in a society (Meyer 2004), this study does not merely explore the features pertaining to the protest, but it delves into the interaction of process and outcome.

This paper presents a detailed investigation of the candlelight protest-impeachment

1 It is also referred to as 'candlelight rally (*chot-bul-jib-hoe*),' 'impeachment protest (*tan-haek-si-wi*),' or 'impeachment rally (*tan-haek-jib-hoe*).' The terms also vary by the interpretation of this political action. In some variations, the incidence is referred to as a social movement (*un-dong*) or even a revolution (*hyeok-myeong*), but the most widely used term is protest (*si-wi*). Taking consistency and readability into account, this study refers to it as 'protest' in singular and plural forms.

nexus, looking into the enabling conditions of political opportunities embedded in the country's democratic system. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses the elements of political opportunity theory, which is employed as the analytical framework for this case study. Section 3 elaborates on the development of the 2016-2017 candlelight protests in Korea. Section 4 delineates the enabling conditions identified by the qualitative analysis of the case study, which is followed by a conclusion.

II. Political Opportunity Theory

Political opportunity theory has undergone constant developments and refinements, a variety of conceptual components having been suggested by theoretical studies (della Porta and Diani, 1999; Giugni 2011; Kriesi 1995; McAdam 1996; Meyer 2004; Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Tarrow 2011; Tilly 1978, 2008). An extensive body of literature has also focused on applying political opportunity empirically to country cases (Alimi 2009; Giugni and Grasso 2019; Ho 2011; Estellés 2010; Kriesi, Koopmans, Duyvendak, and Giugni 1995; Tilly 1995; van Dyke 2003; Xie and van De Heijden 2010; Zachrisson and Lindahl 2019). Eisinger (1973, 25) who initiated political opportunity theory defines political opportunity structure as "a function of the degree to which groups are likely to be able to gain access to power and to manipulate the political system."

The possibility of access to power, political opportunity, encompasses an option of collective action - possibility and risk - that is "(a) available and (b) is expected to result in a favorable outcome" (Koopmans 2004, 65). Access to power, which calls for openness in a political system, depends on the degree of centralized state power and that of the separation of power (Kriesi 2004, 70). The degree of openness of state authorities is an essential factor for taking action, and political opportunity structure serves as a "filter" between mobilization approaches and capacities to take such action (Kitschelt 1986, 59). Giugni (2011, 271) refers to the popular capacity of mobilization, defining it as the "aspects of the political system that affect the possibilities that challenging groups have to mobilize effectively." In this sense, the mobilization of contentious collective action and its substance, specifically protest, is conditioned upon how collective action is formulated and accepted by the political institutions of a regime.

Political opportunity is intimately related to the democratic institutional dimensions of a regime. Setting aside electoral rights, freedoms, equality, and the balance of power are essential values that should be respected in a democratic regime (Bogaards 2009, 401). These fundamental norms constitute the cost and outcome of political action,

and citizens assess the cost of their political action. In addition, political opportunity theory sheds light on power dynamics within a political system; particularly the configuration, division, and support of the political elites affect the political opportunities (Meyer and Minkoff 2004; Tarrow 2011). As actors strategically choose the most optimal strategies that would minimize their socio-political cost incurred from taking political action, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of the relationships between the actors and the political system (Tilly 1978, 55). Hence, the connotations embedded in the concept of political opportunity calls for attention to not only the institutions but also interactions between actors and political elites. Political elites in this paper refer to individuals and groups such as political parties that have power, to varying degrees, to get involved in or manage important political decisions.

Political opportunity refers to "consistent - but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national - sets of clues that encourage people to engage in contentious politics" (Tarrow 2011, 32). A protest is a form of either an efficient choice or an inevitable last resort for those who raise their voices when there is no better institutional option and when the cost of taking such collective action is not too high. The political opportunity structure presents political environments in which people feel secure and sufficiently able to take action to raise their voices. The degree of state repression of this extra-institutional form of political action, therefore, varies by how the protest is perceived in the society where it takes place and, perceived by the state. Citizens can choose to take contentious political action when they recognize opportunities with a low cost of taking such action, and their political opportunities are influenced by the political regime (Tarrow 2011). Contentious political action is affected by the way the state responds to actors, and the features of the regime are decisive in creating opportunities for, and threats to, political action. Likewise, contentious action also "shapes and reshapes the regime" through constant interactions with the regime, such as calls for change (Tilly 2008, 179).

Variables of political opportunity are identified differently not only by scholars but also by the cases at hand, and little agreement has been reached over the application of this theory to empirical cases. Incorporating various conceptual interpretations, McAdam (1996, 27) notes four key elements of political opportunity: (1) openness or closedness in the formal political institutions; (2) stability or vulnerability in power concentration of political elites; (3) presence or absence of political allies; and (4) the state's capacity for repression. Political opportunity, therefore, is not a mere chance to take a single political action but a set of conditions of actors that are available for them to mobilize, exercise their rights and interact with political elites in the

legislative, executive, or judicial agencies, to express their demands.

Besides, political opportunities are not fixed but organically change by the approaches taken by actors and political elites under the influence of a country's socio-political institutional contexts. Hence, opportunities for political action and its outcomes are context-dependent, affected by the structure where political action is taken and "the rules of the games in which those choices are made" (Meyer 2004, 128). Political opportunities can be contextualized by relationships, dynamics, and structures among state authorities, political elites, and citizens. McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 43) maintain that opportunities and risks in taking political action need to be perceived as "subject to attribution" rather than "objective structural factors." Synthesizing these theoretical discussions, this study delves into political opportunities not only as a prerequisite for the occurrence of protest but also in terms of the risks and conditions that the series of candlelight protests might have faced. On a continuum of protest and the impeachment of President Park, this study centers on enabling conditions presented in the exercise of political rights under the given institutions and interactions between citizens and political elites.

III. Development of the Candlelight Protests

A. Before the Eruption of the Protest

Park Geun-hye, from the Conservative Party (Saenuri Party), was elected as the 18th president for the five-year term of 2013-2018. Before the outbreak of the candlelight protests, dissatisfaction with her administration had been burgeoning due to continued socio-economic problems: to name a few, high youth unemployment rates, a widening income gap, and labor market reforms which arguably worsened labor conditions. Besides, the Park administration pushed to introduce government-issued history textbooks into middle and high schools that were written under the controlling leadership of the government, resulting in fierce debates and protests over their authoritarian methods of governing (Evans 2015).

Amid proliferating public denunciations, the sinking of the ferry Sewol with the loss of 304 people on 16 April 2014 affected the whole country. The Park administration's post-disaster responses caused public dismay, while speculation about Park's whereabouts for seven hours right after the disaster was rampant. Public grievances after the Sewol ferry sinking were intensified by the lack of substance in

the commitments made by the Park administration to co-opt popular demands. In addition, putting yellow ribbons on personal belongings or wearing yellow connoted not only an expression of condolence but also a political symbol of resistance against the Park administration.² The Park administration faced heavy criticism over its late evacuation orders and responses, therefore the Sewol ferry sinking was not a mere accident but a trigger to the collective action of citizens to express their denunciation.

B. Development of the Protest

From the National Assembly's annual inspection of government agencies in 2015, some allegations were made against Ms. Choi Soon-sil, including illegitimate involvement in state affairs, the illicit college admission of Ms. Choi's daughter, and suspicious establishment and management of two foundations, MIR and K-Sport. The political scandal, so-called Park-Choi Gate, which became the seed of the candlelight protests was sparked by a news report on 24 October 2016. A Korean broadcasting agency, JTBC, disclosed a tablet computer reportedly acquired from Ms. Choi's previous office which contained around 200 files including confidential documents such as draft statements of President Park ("Dan-dok: Choi Soon-sil PC" 2016). It was found that Ms. Choi had intervened in state management from the shadows, which is illegitimate. Public anger rapidly grew, and many follow-up reports were released. The next day, President Park released the first official statement of apology, stating that she had received comments from Ms. Choi in a way that could be misconstrued ("Got opinions from Choi" 2016).

However, it became widely perceived by the public that as an unofficial aide behind the scenes, Ms. Choi held a grip on power to manipulate not only state affairs but also even the attire and speeches of President Park. Media coverage delved into the illegitimate processes and misuse of her power in forcing tens of Korean companies to make financial contributions to the MIR Foundation (48.6 billion won) and the K-Sports Foundation (28.8 billion won) that Ms. Choi had been alleged to be related to. A series of revelations about Ms. Choi and President Park followed, from corrupt

2 The victims' families and citizens who were disappointed with the government often held rallies to call for investigation with justice. In some protest cases, the protesters and the police turned violent, resulting in physical clashes. In a protest held on September 2015, approximately 13,000 police personnel were deployed in order to disperse the protesters using water cannons and blocking their movement with 470 police buses: It ended up with more than 100 arrests and some injuries to protesters and police officers ("South Korea: Protesters and police clash" 2015).

decisions to illegitimate repression of political opponents. On 27 October, another media agency, Segye Ilbo, released an interview with Ms. Choi. In the interview, she explained that she had helped President Park as a gesture of good faith, denying allegations about wielding illegitimate power ("Exclusive interview" 2016).

Her response could not stop people's collective political action. The political scandal ignited massive public outcry, with many accusing President Park and taking to the streets. The first public candlelight protest was held by more than ten thousand people - estimated by the police - on 29 October 2016. Citizens took to downtown Seoul, from the Gwanghwamun square to the Seoul Plaza, with candles in their hands. In the beginning phase, the protesters called for the president to step down by herself. However, they started to demand her resignation after the first week of November 2016 when she demonstrated her unwillingness to resign through the release of a second public apology. Later, the goal of the candlelight protest became more sharply focused on impeachment. It was not a one-time rally, rather protests were held every Saturday from 29 October 2016 to 29 April 2017. The People's Uprising Struggle Network (*Min-jung chong-gwol-gi tu-jaeng-bon-bu*) led the first three protests, but later a more sustained and organized entity was called upon as the protests expanded rapidly.³

As the main organizing committee of the upcoming candlelight protests, the Emergency Citizen Action for the Park Geun-hye's Resignation (*Park-geun-hye dae-tong-lyeong toe-jin beom-gug-min haeng-dong*) was organized by more than 1,500 civil society groups on 9 November 2016 in a joint effort to achieve the agreed goal. The protests were more than spontaneous rallies in public spaces: During the weekly protest events, a big stage was set up with professional audio equipment and it had well-organized programs such as speeches by civil group leaders or someone from the protesting crowd (Kim 2017). Ms. Choi was arrested on 3 November on charges of corruption, fraud, and unlawful use of power. A few days later, two presidential aides of President Park, An Chong-bum and Jeong Ho-seong, were also arrested. Public anger, however, did not abate.

The protests sharply expanded in scale and intensity with tens and hundreds of thousands of people attending the protests every Saturday. As the severity of the issue and level of denunciation rose, individual citizens and civil society organizations became more committed to collective political action. On 30 November, President Park approved

3 The Network is organized by tens of member organizations of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU, *Minju-nochong*). Being politically left-oriented, the KCTU has been vocal in not only labor-related issues but also other socio-political issues.

the special prosecutor, Park Young-soo, who was recommended by the opposition party in the National Assembly, to conduct an investigation into this case, stating that she would cooperate with the investigation into herself and the people around her. Nevertheless, the demand of the protesters for her resignation did not wane, and in opinion polls conducted in the first week of December 2015, 81% of the respondents were in favor of her impeachment ("Approval rating hits 5 percent" 2016). At the sixth protest, on 3 December, more than two million people were estimated to have participated, which is the biggest scale in the modern history of the Korean constitutional government (Ock 2016).⁴

C. The Impeachment Bill and its Consequence

The opposition parties (Democratic Party of Korea, People's Party, and Justice Party) tabled an impeachment bill on 8 December 2016. The next day, the National Assembly passed the impeachment bill, approved by 234 out of 299 members (78 percent) of the National Assembly. The bill listed the President's unconstitutional acts, divulgence of state classified information, and misuse of power to solicit Korean conglomerates to donate funds to the MIR and K-Sports Foundations (see "Full statement-1" and "Full statement-2" 2016). It also claimed that the President neglected her duty as the leader of the country to protect citizens' lives, as her administration had not been fully committed in its response to the disastrous sinking of the ferry Sewol. A weekly-held candlelight protest continued after the impeachment proposal was submitted to the Constitutional Court. Right after the impeachment bill passed the National Assembly, President Park was suspended from her position and the then-Prime Minister, Hwang Kyo-ahn, served as the acting President.

The candlelight protests continued, with a massive number of citizens even braving the freezing winter weather. As the Constitutional Court was supposed to make a final decision within 180 days, the Constitutional Court held public hearings, and all nine judges investigated the case. President Park refused to be present at hearings arranged by the Constitutional Court and her counsel appeared to advocate for her. On 16 December 2016, President Park's defense team submitted the formal response to the impeachment bill, which insisted that the impeachment bill was built on little evidence

4 It needs to be noted that there is a gap in the estimated size made by the organizing committee and the police. Due to increasing controversies over the estimation, the police discontinued the release of information on the estimated participants in each protest as of 13 January 2017 ("The police discontinued" 2017).

and therefore should be dismissed ("Overview of the written response" 2016). In particular, Park's side argued that the president's term is guaranteed in the Constitution and a low approval rate from opinion polls and candlelight protests are not legally valid as a justification for impeachment ("Overview of the written response" 2016). A total of 17 hearings were held during the deliberations of the Constitutional Court. 90 days after the Bill was submitted, on 10 March 2017, the final verdict was live-streamed nationwide. The Constitutional Court upheld the impeachment in a unanimous 8-0 decision, stating that President Park's state management in engagement of Ms. Choi and other unlawful activities during her presidency betrayed the citizens and violated the Korean Constitution (Constitutional Court of Korea 2017). Four more protests were held after the announcement, as the protesters demanded her arrest and punishment of the people around her who had infringed laws and undermined democracy. The last official candlelight protest took place on 29 April 2017. As a consequence of the impeachment, the presidential election which had been scheduled in December 2017 was brought forward to 9 May 2017.

IV. Exploring Political Opportunity as an Enabling Condition

Not weighing one over the other, this study finds three enabling conditions that laid the foundation for citizens to secure and exercise their political opportunity in the candlelight protest-impeachment nexus: (1) political freedoms guaranteed in the existing institutions; (2) political elites in alignment with the protesters and rule of law in the protest-impeachment nexus; and (3) low risk of state repression of law-abiding collective action.

A. Political Freedoms Guaranteed in the Existing Formal Institutions

Political participation is not only a strategy for citizens to resolve social or economic problems but also "a means of tackling the growing democratic deficit" (Gaventa 2004, 26). While this case of protest began with a condemnation of a political scandal, the candlelight protests served as a channel where the citizens expressed "accumulated grievances" and "political dissatisfaction" about the retreat of Korean democracy during the Park administration (Kang 2019, 48). On the other hand, public resentment of the government was not the sole driving force of the candlelight protests: Throughout the twenty-three candlelight protests, citizens called for legitimate governance and state

accountability. In other words, concerns about the quality of democracy motivated Korean citizens to join such a collective action (Alemán 2019).

In this case, the existing political system was open to accommodating popular collective action. Freedoms of expression and assembly were guaranteed, with people having little fear of arbitrary arrest. For those who joined the candlelight protests, the risk of participation was low and the level of acceptance of collective political action was high. Citizens perceived their political opportunity as large enough to dismiss the risk of political collective action. For them, it was not necessary to be afraid of state reprisals, such as arrests or being taken by the police for interrogation. Hence, citizens had sufficient freedoms to express their denunciations of the president and the government, which contributed to the early development and endurance of the candlelight protest.

During the period of the protests, a massive number of online comments and discussions were posted by people, and they were able to share their views and mobilize others to join the protest. Sufficient information on the political scandal and the protest was made available to citizens as news spread widely via social networking services (SNS), personal messengers, and Korean online discussion platforms, such as Daum and Naver. On Facebook, people were not only incidentally exposed to political news and protest-related information but also actively shared it (Lee 2019). People's wide usage of and free access to the Internet also promoted mass mobilization and reduced the cost of participating in the collective political action, serving as an incentive for people's participation in the protests (Lee and Fu 2019).

Most of the protesters were not affiliated to specific organizations but self-mobilized; they were active in voluntarily sharing live information before the protests or even in real-time on social media (Kang 2019). The right to expression in Korean society has, in the past, been challenged by Korean governments - both conservative and liberal - which tried to silence political opposition, and the formal institutions were not sufficiently efficient to correct the behaviors of these governments (Haggard and You 2015). However, in this protest case, citizens' rights to expression and assembly were not suppressed by state authorities or institutional frameworks, but rather they were sufficiently exercised such that an enormous number of Koreans felt able to denounce President Park over her wrongdoings and take to the streets.

Freedom of the media was also sufficiently guaranteed to the extent that media agencies reported information detrimental to the Park administration. Media agencies, including JTBC which disclosed information on this scandal, did not face severe state repression after the revelation of the political scandal. Besides, a lot of media agencies

were committed to delivering news, with diverse perspectives and interpretations being available to the public. Diversified media sources were present, and this feature contributed to stimulating citizens to join the collective action (Hong 2018). Some reports were made about the Park administration trying to prevent media coverage about Ms. Choi and negative news against her administration and making a blacklist of directors, entertainers, and artists with opposing views. The impeachment bill also accused her of infringement of principle rights and freedoms which are against the Constitution, threatening Korean democracy. However, the political system, regardless of the president's administration, respected the rights to criticize and take contentious action. The candlelight protests were live-streamed on some broadcasting channels, and pictures, videos, and news reports were circulated by media agencies and citizens. During the candlelight protests, no dramatic manipulation was made at the institutional level to contain this popular contention against the government.

The establishment and performances of non-governmental organizations in civil society was another key enabling condition for Korean citizens to participate in the protests. There are many political associations in Korean society, and the organizing committee of these candlelight protests consisted of around 1,500 civil society groups.⁵ This associational environment was the impetus for this collective action, and political associations and networks had a direct effect on people's participation in the candlelight protests (Do 2017a). The existing networks and organizations contributed to scaling up the candlelight protests in a more efficient and sustained manner. As the rights to establish an organization and to carry out activities were respected, more than 1,500 civil society groups were able to be present and this quickly snowballed into a more organized association. The candlelight protests per se were led by the Emergency Citizen Action for the Park Geun-hye's Resignation, yet its mobilization did not deliberately occur by any structure of hierarchy. The protests developed through the self-mobilization of citizens from diverse segments of society with the backing of a sufficient level of freedom to expression, association, and assembly. They joined the protest on their own out of deep resentment for the government and increased awareness about the necessity of political action.

Moreover, the candlelight protests were an example in which anyone in Korean society was able to exercise their political opportunity through collective action.

5 Establishment and activities of political associations are respected as long as they do not violate the National Security Act. This law remains controversial in Korean politics, but it is beyond the scope of this study.

Regardless of their political affiliations, however, the organizing committee kept this protest open and accessible to anyone. The topic of the protest was political, yet the organizing committee did not restrict the participants to political allies but encouraged anyone who was disappointed with the current government. As termed by Giugni and Grasso (2019, 197), "pluralization of protest politics" was observed in the composition of the protest participants; it ranged across age, gender, class, and political orientation. The protesters united around a demand for democratic state management and the rule of law, leaving different political perspectives aside (Turner et al. 2018, 914). Not only in Seoul but also in many places of each major city were candlelight protests organized, and a variety of people with a diverse range of backgrounds joined the protests. The participants consisted not only of those who had the same political interests, but also of like-minded citizens with different political orientations, and various segments of society joined the protests. According to Lee et al. (2017), 80 percent of the 2,058 respondents who participated in the protest held on 26 November stated that they decided to join the protest through the acquisition of information from the media. While people with a liberal orientation showed a high tendency to participate in the candlelight protests, the political identity of the protesters was not limited to liberals, but the unaffiliated and even conservatives joined the protests (See Do 2017b; Lee et al. 2017).⁶ Compared with the uprising of 1987 to end the authoritarian regime for democratization that was mainly driven by several key groups, namely students, the opposition parties, and activist groups, the 2016-2017 candlelight protests were led by a broad, heterogeneous group (Sonn 2017).

B. Political Elites in Alignment with the Protesters and the Rule of Law

On the other hand, a distinction needs to be made between citizens' political action and political dynamics within the National Assembly. Citizens were able to join the protests, but they were not able to engage in the decision-making process for impeachment. The voices of the protests resonated only to the extent that political elites from the National Assembly recognized their demands and took follow-up measures

6 A more numerical consideration of political orientation needs to be made with caution as it involves an issue of statistical sampling. According to Lee et al. (2017), the percentage of the respondents identified themselves as liberal, centrist, and conservative was 39.1 percent, 19.4 percent, and 17.3 percent, respectively. On the other hand, in a survey conducted by Do (2017b), 424 out of 664 participants identified themselves as liberal (63.9 percent) while 206 respondents as unaffiliated (31.0 percent) and 34 respondents as conservative (5.1 percent).

such as legislation for the impeachment bill. Put differently, a political opportunity to take collective action was created by citizens, yet it did not necessarily mean an opportunity to take the president down from the Blue House by themselves. The interpretation of this protest case may vary by the different models of democracy, either seen as a deliberative action to demonstrate resistance against the ruling power or as a direct action to check and correct that power (Hong 2018).

In this respect, the positioning of political elites, specifically the lawmakers in the National Assembly, was critical in the protest-impeachment nexus. As the influence of division within and alignment of political elites is a salient dimension in collective action (Tarrow 2011), political elites played a critical role in the successful outcome of the protests. They became intimately involved in the processes of this protest-impeachment nexus as some political party members and leaders often joined the protests in person and the impeachment bill was initiated by the opposition parties of the National Assembly. Three opposition parties took coherent action to realize the impeachment bill, and the momentum of political action at the legislative body level proceeded through the alliance of opposition party members. The protesters called for government accountability over the political scandal and more democratic governance, and their demands were supported by the opposition parties.

Heated debates over the interpretation of the candlelight protests were made in the National Assembly, yet as time passed and the protests grew, many members of the ruling party also joined this political wave. Alliance was ruptured among the ruling party members, state agencies, and even within the Blue House, and their split over the response to the Park-Choi scandal led to the breakup of the conservative bloc (Heo and Yoon 2018). Also, the opposition party members pressed and persuaded the ruling party members to recognize popular opinion and jumped on the impeachment bandwagon. Entangled with their political interest and the unprecedented wave of public contention, tens of members from the ruling party turned their position to vote in favor, with the result far exceeding the minimum requirement of a two-thirds majority of 200 votes. In pushing the state agencies to deal with this case in a legitimate and transparent manner, "the perseverance and the large numbers" of the citizen protesters played a substantial role (Turner et al. 2018, 914).

Other political circumstances were also in play: The general election held in April 2016 resulted in the main opposition party (123 seats) taking one more seat than the ruling party (122 seats); President Park's term was past the halfway mark; the parliamentary inspection of state administration publicized several issues around this scandal; and the special prosecution team conducted an investigation into the scandal

(Heo and Yoon 2018). Having said that, the alignment between the protesters and both sides of the ruling and opposition parties played a significant role in the achievements of the candlelight protests. Not every member of the ruling party presented unconditional support for President Park, but the voting result of the impeachment bill demonstrated that some of the lawmakers from the ruling party voted in favor of the bill regardless of their political affiliation. A sufficient number of political elites in the National Assembly positioned themselves on the side of impeachment, which concurred with the citizens holding the candlelight protests. This alignment created significant momentum for the impeachment processes to proceed.

The legislative body did not ignore the massive wave of voices rolling across the country, and the political elites, the members of the National Assembly who hold decision-making power, passed the impeachment bill without any critical intervention imposed by the executive administration. Also, separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judiciary apparatus brought substance to the process and allowed for a lawful assessment of the president. As the principle of the rule of law was presented more strongly than political stakes, the politicians of the National Assembly enabled public demands to materialize in the impeachment bill.

The Constitutional Court respected the principle of the rule of law, rather than being submissive to the president. The Constitutional Court, the supreme judicial body, upheld the impeachment of the president, which would have not been possible if its independence had been infringed by the Park administration. The final verdict of the Constitutional Court clearly demonstrated the principle that no one stands above the law, even the president (Kim 2017). Even though the target was the leader of the country, neither citizens nor political elites were suppressed by the Blue House. Through unbiased and just processes taken by political elites in the legislative and judicial state agencies, the impeachment processes were able to move forward according to the established institutions.

C. Low Risk of State Repression of Law-abiding Collective Action

The candlelight protests were a form of non-violent collective action. The 2016-2017 protests were not the first cases, with several candlelight protests in the early 2000s being predecessors. In 2002, a candlelight vigil rally was used as a non-violent approach for remembrance of two high school girls, Hyo-sun and Mi-sun, who were killed by a United States Army military vehicle. In 2004, citizens took to the streets with candlelight to oppose the impeachment of the then-President Roh Moo-hyun. Another

massive candlelight protest was the 2008 protest against a lift on a ban on American beef imports. The case of the 2008 anti-American beef candlelight protest was a remarkable event in Korean contemporary politics in that collective political action had become more diversified in its composition of the participants and the way they participated in political action (Shin 2008). Citizens' interests and feelings over not only political but also other social agendas related to their lives became a motivating factor for people from different segments of society to decide to join a protest (Hong 2017).

What cuts across these candlelight protests is that the participants neither aimed to catalyze public disorder nor subvert the regime. They took collective action as a strategic choice to make their voices heard within the boundaries of legal norms and rules. The candlelight protests can be characterized as a form of non-violent collective political action not artificially forced by a specific anti-government group but organically and independently developed by citizens. Likewise, the 2016-2017 candlelight protests were mostly held with little aggression and few unplanned violent clashes: Overall, it was nonviolent resistance (Lee 2018). They did not seek to overthrow the regime by force but to hold the state institutions accountable and keep the president's alleged offenses in check (Kim 2018). By following non-violent and law-abiding strategies, the protesters lowered the risk of being dispersed or repressed by state authorities.

The organizers tried to keep the protests orderly and peaceful so that they would not give "any motive for ruling forces to counterattack" (Kang 2019, 61). A large crowd of protesters even gave a round of applause to the police officers standing over the police line and encouraged others to remain peaceful and calm when someone tried to provoke aggression against the police ("Impeachment bill passed" 2016). Also, the police deployed at the scene did not take a violent approach to disperse them. Even though some protesters were taken to a police station due to not complying with the rules and obstructing police, the police exercised their authority to ensure that the protest was held within the approved time and space and the police did not follow a strategy of all-out suppression.

Past protests and confrontations in the history of Korean democratic development have often presented the possibility or occurrence of tension and clashes between protesters and state authorities (Suh et al. 2018). Considering that the Korean police has some notoriety with its human rights violations and coercive repression (Suh et al. 2018), this candlelight protest case is meaningful; it demonstrated restraint in the state response to popular collective action. Whereas the police and the protesters practiced violence resulting in clashes and injuries in the democratization movement

of 1987, this candlelight protest case showed both sides sticking to non-violent approaches throughout, over twenty protest events (Sonn 2017).

Korea has institutionalized regulation in the form of the 2007 Assembly and Demonstration Act which stipulates that anyone who wants to hold a demonstration in public space should report the details to the police station in the jurisdiction from 720 to 48 hours in advance (Korea Legislation Research Institute n.d.). The rules about police lines and police deterrence are articulated in detail: For instance, Article 13 stipulates a police line shall be set up to a minimum extent so that the participants can hold the protest safely and public order is not disturbed. The law was established to prevent disorder and inconvenience in a public place, but simultaneously, it guarantees citizens can exercise their political rights to assembly and expression. In this protest case, the 2007 Assembly and Demonstration Act was not used as a tool of state repression of political rights but an institutional framework with which both the protesters and the security forces endeavored to comply.

A conflict over a march during the protest arose between the organizing committee and the police, but it was mediated by the Seoul Administrative Court. For instance, in the early protests, the police rejected some parts of a protest proposal. The organizing committee submitted a request for suspension of the police's execution, which was accepted by the Seoul Administration Court. The Court approved the protesters to march through downtown and even up to 200 meters away from the Blue House, the presidential residence, while it limited the time to 5 pm for assembly and 5:30 pm for the march of the fifth protest on 26 November 2016 ("The court allows" 2016). The Court issued permission of the candlelight protest within the acceptable levels of restriction over the protesters for the sake of minimizing traffic congestion and public inconvenience. The judiciary's measures helped this protest to take place within the legitimate boundaries (Suh et al. 2018). The police's authority was balanced by the Court, its decision being made open to the public. The Court's decisions gave stronger institutional justification to the protesters in their action, which stands in sharp contrast to state agencies' previous exercise of authority when they confined people's demonstrations (Heo and Yoon 2018). The police were present with a police fence built through the neighborhood of the Blue House to prevent further movement in the prohibited area in accordance with Article 11 of the 2007 Assembly and Demonstration Act. It was respected by the protesters who turned their way when the police cordoned them off with a police line, resulting in no serious clashes. These circumstances suggest that the risks for citizens exercising their rights to assembly and expression were low.

V. Conclusion

Along with the context-dependent easing and contraction in political opportunities across the different outbreaks of public protest, the overall institutions and enforcement mechanisms of democracy have been constantly discussed, contested, and negotiated in Korean society. In general, since the democratization movement and transition took place in the late 1980s, political opportunities for citizens to take collective political action have gradually expanded (Yun 1997). Political opportunities in the 2016-2017 candlelight protest case were explicitly present, and motivated people to take to the streets in political solidarity with the shared goal of seeking better democratic governance. The protest led previously fragmented groups to pursue the same goal of punishing the undemocratic practices of the government, which is a remarkable political achievement amid the country's legacy of authoritarianism and democratization (Chang 2018).

The political opportunity structure changes over time and by other contextual factors and actors, but those who take collective political action should take the existing political opportunity structure "as a given in their short-term strategic calculations." (Kriesi 1995, 168). Overall, the structural elements in the Korean political system were a positive factor for citizens' political action in this case. The candlelight protests began with collective grievances about the Park administration, but they expanded further to a historically unprecedented nationwide movement with the backing of respected political opportunities with low risk of taking collective action. Democratic norms and rules were reportedly threatened during the Park presidency, yet the existing democratic institutions were solid and sufficiently established to respect the candlelight protests and the massive number of participants. Considering that political opportunity is generally shaped by structural constraints and risks of repression imposed on actors, the cost of participation in the candlelight protests was low for Korean citizens and civil society groups to develop the protests to the extent that their demands were heard and acted upon by the National Assembly.

These protests underline the importance of political environments to bring substance to the process and on the outcomes of popular collective action. From the aspect of a goal, political elites of the opposition parties and the protesters stood in alignment with the same objective, President Park's impeachment, forming a political momentum to make public demands heard and considered at the National Assembly. State agencies did not impose any unlawful measures to deter the protesters. Particularly, the legislative and judiciary agencies responded to the protests according to the established law and principles. They facilitated the mobilization and success of collective political action.

Also, most of the protesters, including the organizing committee, adopted the strategy of nonviolent protest in their resistance against the Park administration. There were no fatal clashes between the security forces and the participants, with both sides trying not to use physical aggression.

On the other hand, it is worth noting that this protest does not connote a greater opportunity for citizens' participation in political decision-making processes. This protest case resonated in Korean politics, but it did not expand to an institutional change for citizens to get more directly involved in political decision-making. Even though the candlelight protests achieved their goal of impeachment, some challenges to tackle long-accumulated ills and irregularities remain, which characterizes this case as unfinished (Sonn 2017; Turner et al. 2018).

The presentations of political polarization and divisions also need to be taken into account. Relatively smaller scale counter-candlelight protests were organized by the loyalist groups for President Park, following the impeachment bill having passed. Those who are usually labeled as pro-Park and far-right conservative have claimed that her scandal and impeachment processes resulted from political manipulations. Even after the impeachment, they held rallies to refute the impeachment and demanded her release and the resignation of the following President Moon Jae-in from the Democratic Party. Also, the impact of political opportunity on the success or failure of achieving a goal can vary by the subjective perception of the actors (Suh 2001), and a gap may exist between conceptual political opportunity and interpretations of empirical experiences of the protest participants. The perception acquired from the participation or observation of this candlelight protest may differ by actor, which could be explored in future studies.

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