

7 Nostalgic Nationalists in South Korea

The Flag-Carriers' Struggles

Abstract

The Flag-Carriers' Struggle is the counter-movement to the 2016–2017 *Candlelight Revolution*. Flag-carriers found Park Geun-Hye's impeachment and Moon Jae-In's inauguration incomprehensible. They argued that Park was innocent, called for her release from prison, and claimed that Moon's election was illegitimate. An analysis of speeches made during conservative counter-protests between 2016 and 2019 illustrates that these activists rejected a new era in South Korean political and economic life. Their speeches conveyed a clear desire to have the legacy of the industrialization generation recognized in contemporary South Korea. These flag-carriers are evidence that a marginalized set of desires and aspirations about South Korean nationalism and identity coexist alongside the progressive views of the *Candlelight* protesters.

Keywords: Nostalgic nationalism, South Korea, flag-carriers, Park Geun-Hye impeachment, *Candlelight* protests

Introduction

South Korea has undergone monumental political and economic changes in recent decades. It is a young democracy and its economy has advanced rapidly. Like other democratic societies, there is a broad spectrum of political parties. Political divisions between progressives and conservatives are evident as political realities, and each group sees the other as its main competitor for political power. In contemporary South Korean politics, however, these labels have developed particular connotations which do not align perfectly with traditional divisions in liberal democracies such as conservatives, liberals, progressives, and ethnonationalists. South Korean progressives are generally comparable to a mixture of their moderate centre-left and moderate right parties in the liberal-democratic world, albeit with

perhaps a stronger reformist bent; they tend to focus on enacting policy changes that will enhance the freedoms and rights of ordinary people, which are key agendas for libertarians in the West. South Korean conservatives, meanwhile, are comparable to a combination of neo-liberals and the more rigid doctrinaire conservative parties of the democratic world. Unlike their counterparts in other countries, however, South Korean conservatives are still motivated by objectives from the Cold War era, such as the promotion of capitalism and opposition to communism. These objectives also, therefore, affect how they view relations with North Korea: they equate inter-Korea dialogues with an attempt to communize the Korean peninsula. Whereas the Cold War and its associated ideological conflicts have become irrelevant in most democracies, these conflicts are still pertinent in South Korea.

Both progressive and conservative politicians have attempted to create visions of the Korean nation-state that reflect their worldviews, and one of the most potent expressions of nationalism from the conservative side of South Korean politics has been the “national flag-carriers’ troop” (태극기 부대). The “flaggers” were spurred into action by the campaign to impeach President Park Geun-Hye in late 2016, which has been termed the “*Candlelight Revolution*.” Park was accused of allowing her long-term confidante, Choi Soon-Sil, to exercise undue influence over national affairs. Progressive activists played a leading role in organizing the campaign against Park, but the belief that she had committed wrongdoings worthy of removal from office crossed traditional ideological divides. The campaign was supported by most segments of South Korean society, and accurately reflected national sentiment about Park’s fitness for office. A survey in December 2016, at the height of the campaign to remove Park, found that 81 per cent of South Koreans supported her impeachment and just 14 per cent opposed it.¹ In the face of this overwhelming sentiment that Park should resign, conservative flag-carriers claimed that she was innocent. They continued to protest even after the National Assembly voted to refer articles of impeachment to the Constitutional Court, and after the Court upheld one of those articles in March 2017. Park was later found guilty of

1 Gallup Korea. 2016. “데일리 오피니언 제239호 (2016년 12월 2주)—대통령 탄핵, 차기 정치 지도자 선호도” (Daily Opinion 2016 December 2nd Week: President Impeachment, Preferred Next President). <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=795>, accessed January 17, 2021. The flaggers also strongly opposed the prosecution of Yi Jae-Yong, CEO of the Samsung Corp., for bribing President Park, see *Hankyoreh Shinmun*. 2021. “박영수 특검팀 4년2개월 고난의 행군...개인적으로 안타깝다” (The Park Young-Su Team’s Concerted Investigation). January 18, 2021, http://www.hani.co.kr/arti/society/society_general/979256.html, accessed January 18, 2021.

bribery and abuse of power. Following this guilty verdict, the flag-carriers called for Park's impeachment to be voided and for her release from jail. They also claimed that the election of Moon Jae-In, Park's successor, was illegitimate.

However, the emergence of the flag-carriers represents something more than the espousal of a certain view about the impeachment. These activists attribute South Korea's economic development almost exclusively to the leadership of Park Chung-Hee, a conservative icon (and Park Geun-Hye's father), who ruled South Korea from 1961 to 1979. Like their progressive counterparts and the *Candlelight* protesters, the flag-carriers are nationalists who care deeply about South Korea. They have a clear vision about the direction in which they believe South Korean society should move. In this chapter I use a critical-realist perspective to examine the socio-economic and cultural conditions that produced the flag-carriers and their movement, as well as the impact that they have had on South Korean society. The chapter illustrates how the flag-carriers' worldview is internally coherent, in that it accurately reflects values shared by its members, but that it has limited external resonance, insofar as it is out of step with the political views of the majority of South Koreans. In this sense, there is an anti-system (Capoccia 2002; Zulianello 2018) element to the flag-carriers' movement, insofar as they are unable to accept the legitimacy of their political opponents, and they thus pose a threat to the future of liberal democracy in South Korea.

Conventional studies of nationalism tend to prioritize its top-down variety, whereby political leaders "create a discourse with which people of different minds, differently located in a society, can feel comfortable" (Cohen 1996: 810). Political leaders often claim to know what their constituents think and want, but nationalism imposed from above fails "to recognize the role of the ordinary person in taking the grand images presented by the leadership and recasting them in the more familiar terms of local experience" (Herzfeld 1992: 49, cited in Cohen 1996: 811).

Grassroots nationalism, meanwhile, can also have a lasting influence. Leaders need to listen to grassroots concerns, which are integral to an advanced democracy (Dobson 2014). If "the nation" is to remain a coherent and meaningful political unit, political leaders need to know what is on the minds of citizens. There is a rich tradition of grassroots nationalism in South Korea, drawn from "bottom-up discourses on nationalism re-shaping national imaginations among people, bringing the nation closer to the everyday experience of the general public" (Ma 2007: 149). Shared experiences of the threat of North Korean aggression, the corresponding need for Korean reunification, and state-cultivated as well as grassroots-based anti-Japanese

sentiments have to varying degrees been politically exploited in South Korea. Before the country became a democracy, military and authoritarian regimes coerced ordinary people to cooperate with top-down nationalistic governance, and most South Koreans acquiesced to this demand. However, ordinary people have been more willing to express their own version of nationalism since the transition to democracy in the 1980s.

The Rise of the *Flag-Carriers' Movement*

Since 2016, the flag-carriers have been the most persistent organizers of large-scale political events in South Korea (Yi 2017: 39; Chae 2018: 108). Initially, participants tended to be aged sixty and older, but over time these events began to include a visible representation of other demographic groups, including high school and university students, young mothers, conservative academics, journalists, and Christians (Kim 2017b: 9). The flaggers venerate the political and economic trajectories set by the Park Chung-Hee regime (1961–1979), and are philosophically committed to those trajectories (Kang 2019).

These conservative activists value the politics and culture of the past, when the industrialization generation were the primary agents of South Korean society during its rapid development in the 1970s and 1980s (Chae 2018). They depict these decades, during which President Park and his conservative successors engineered a seemingly miraculous economic recovery and development, and helped the country to recover from the devastation of the Korean War in the 1950s, as a glorious era in South Korean history. Park, and the people who worked so hard during this era, are thus the heroes of the flag-carriers' "imagined community" (Anderson 2006). They cherish the values of that generation, such as an emphasis on national security and economic development, and believe that the industrialization generation has been wrongly displaced from the centre of national life due to the rapid political and cultural changes that began in the 1990s, following the 1988 Seoul Olympics. The flag-carriers, whether young or old, prefer the Park-era political and economic systems to contemporary South Korea, and think that society is on the wrong path (Lammers and Baldwin 2018).

The flag-carriers express their view of the industrialization era through what they do and say in their campaigns, but they are selective in how they remember and depict that era. In addition to the South Korean flag, flag-carriers display American, Israeli, and occasionally Japanese flags, as well as the logo of the Samsung Corporation. They also display symbols

that represent government organizations, former soldiers, conservative Christians, anti-communism, and some dress in military uniforms (Yi 2017: 46–47). In other words, the flag-carriers celebrate the role of conservative organizations and governments, in partnership with anti-communist allies such as the U.S. and Japan, in fostering rapid economic development during a vital and consequential era in South Korean history. This type of depiction of modern South Korean history, however, downplays or ignores what progressives see as the many negative aspects of the industrialization era, such as the denial of democracy and human rights, as well as the environmental degradation that accompanied rapid economic development. As scholars such as Martin Heisler have noted, it is common for nationalists to present distorted or incomplete versions of history that neglect inconvenient truths and emphasize the supposedly glorious aspects of the past (Heisler 2008a, 2008b).

South Korea's flag-carriers appear to be prone to this type of partial reading of recent history, and this has put them in an antagonistic relationship with their progressive opponents, whose memories and understanding of the industrialization era are very different. These conservative activists have criticized the socio-political directions set by progressive administrations, starting with Kim Dae-Jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-Hyun (2003–2008). They oppose the shift away from authoritarian politics and the Sunshine Policy towards North Korea, in particular. In the eyes of conservatives, progressive administrations are intent on undoing the achievements of the Park Chung-Hee era and the industrialization generation who grew up during that time (Chang 2018b, 2018c; Eom 2004; Lee 2005). In placing themselves in such an antagonistic relationship with progressive politicians, however, the flag-carriers have also isolated themselves from a significant portion of other South Koreans (Cheon 2017; Kim and Heo 2018; cited in Chang 2018b: 358; see also Honneth 1995).

Prior studies of the flaggers have focused on personal motivations for participating in protests. Kim and Heo, for instance, argue that the protests are an attempt by older South Koreans to protect their standing in society, in response to younger people who have suffered from a lack of socio-economic opportunities (known as the "*Hell Chosun syndrome*")—(Kim and Heo 2018). However, arguments based solely on the assumption of inter-generational conflict ignore the fact that flaggers enjoy a reasonable degree of support among younger South Koreans. Surprisingly, those younger Koreans embraced some outdated ideas that resonate with the older generation. Kim Hak-Ryang has highlighted flaggers' support for Park Geun-Hye. Rather than factors such as place of origin, gender, income, or education, Kim argues

that the main motivation for participating in these protests is opposition to Park's impeachment (Kim 2019).

The flag-carriers' campaign is often depicted as a counter-movement to the progressive *Candlelight* protests (see, for example, Chae 2018: 109). But these studies do not explore what the flag-carriers actually think and say about Park's impeachment and its consequences, and how their vision of South Korea's future differs from that of progressives. Prior studies demonstrate that the flag-carriers are purposeful agents, but overlook the fact that their protests amount to more than merely the actions of a small number of disgruntled individuals. The flag-carriers are conscious political agents who are linked to prevailing structural and cultural contexts, which enable them to potentially enact political change in South Korea, or alternatively to preserve the status quo (cf., Ma 2007: 149).

Kim Wang-Bae notes that flag-carriers promote a free South Korea as an imagined community that needs to be protected at any cost (Kim 2017b: 33). Flag-carriers see the ideological division between conservatives and progressives since 2017 as akin to a gentle or quasi-civil war. The flag-carriers also exhibit traits of "anti-system" political parties and movements (Mitra 2016). That is, they have rejected the logic of political moderation, whereby political parties and actors appeal to the "median voter" by abandoning or compromising on their most extreme policies and beliefs (Downs 1957). This "moderation thesis" holds that rational political actors, especially those who aspire to govern in democratic societies, adopt policy platforms that align with the beliefs and preferences of identifiable groups of voters (Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005). Evidence of such moderation has been found in situations in which niche or new parties adjust their policies to compete with established ones in seventeen Western European countries,² the abandonment of radical proposals by former militants and their transformation into regular political parties in Latin America (Sprenkels 2019), and the partial integration of Islamic parties into conventional politics in Egypt, Iran, and Turkey (Tezcür 2010; Wickham 2004).

Anti-system parties and groups, however, may be ambivalent in their moderation and retain their core beliefs (Mitra 2013, 2016). In doing so, they may not accept the legitimacy of the extant democratic political system and the actors within it. That is, while moderates focus on "politics within the system," anti-system political actors concentrate on the "politics of the system" (Mitra 2016: 93). The anti-system descriptor fits South Korea's

2 Most of these countries are members of the European Union, although the sample also includes Norway and Switzerland; see Meguid (2005).

flag-carriers. What distinguishes the flag-carriers from other anti-system parties and movements, however, is that they are not a new political force but an integral part of the existing body politic. They represent a subset of South Korean conservative politics that has recently held power, but feared that it was losing influence and relevance.³

Political groups logically hold their own partisan worldview and ideology, which are of universal validity in the given time and context. Theories of inter-group dynamics (Festinger 1957; cited in Chang 2018a: 91), or group think (see Janis 1982), offer insights into how the flag-carriers promote such a partisan worldview and ideology, which may have limited universal validity. Cass Sunstein argues that group polarization can result when members of a group access sources of information that strengthens their beliefs, and then share this information and support each other, which reconfirms those beliefs (Sunstein 2003, 2009; cited in Chang 2018a: 91). The flag-carriers' selective exposure to news strengthens their unity, and their ideological beliefs have been well researched theoretically, as noted above. These studies have the advantage of considering grassroots perspectives and provide rich data from the bottom-up, but they do not place the flag-carriers in their proper structural and cultural context to the benefit of a rigorous analysis.

A Critical-Realist Analysis of the Flag-Carriers' Nationalism

The flag-carriers' protests have been primarily an effort to oppose Park's impeachment, but they should also be understood as a campaign to oppose social change in South Korea, including in the structures and culture that shape the potential for such change. Margaret Archer's critical-realist approach to social movements shows how the interaction between structures, culture, and agency can reproduce or transform a society. For Archer, the structures of a society are the result of (un)equal relationships, which become engrained in society. Structures produce cultures and ideas, which can reinforce or dismantle those structures. Culture and ideas, in turn, can (im)mobilize agents to call for and effect social change, which can then bring about new structures or reproduce existing structures (Archer 1995, 1996).

3 Under complex socio-economic context, especially the sky-rocketing cost of housing in the capital areas like Seoul and Gyeonggi-do Province, the conservatives have regained power on the presidential election on the March 9, 2022 election, which threw out the progressive government after its one five-year term.

A critical-realist approach assumes that people have material interests and idealistic beliefs through which they express their concerns and translate these into action (Porpora 2013: 28). When people work together, they can reproduce or change the structures and culture of a society. Given its ability to explain the interaction between structure, culture, and agency, Archer's understanding of social movements is useful for analysing the grassroots nationalism of South Korea's flag-carriers.

Methods

In what follows, I analyse flag-carriers' ideas, opinions, and viewpoints, as expressed in public speeches at rallies between 2016 and 2019. I selected speeches based on relevance, and the resultant corpus consisted of twenty-seven YouTube clips containing thirty-nine speakers' statements (Table 7.1).

Table 7.1 Flag-Carrying Speakers' Age and Gender Distribution

Age group	Middle & High school	University or 20s	30s to 50s	60s +	Total
Male	2	5	8	4	19
Female	3	7	8	2	20
Total	5	12	16	6	39

Note: Based on the information provided by speakers and visual assessments

South Korean media reports generally provide the names and ages of people who appear in the audio-visual recordings. It is also common for speakers to reveal their ages and professions during their speeches. I have watched all the video clips several times each and reviewed the transcripts. In doing so, I compiled a record of all the speakers' genders, reported ages, and occupations. I then checked these records against the videos for accuracy.

The most important criteria for inclusion in the corpus were that a speech took place at the flag-carriers' rallies, and that the speeches were then shared publicly and widely. The data contained in the speeches is publicly available and voluntarily provided by its creators in a non-exclusive manner.

Using YouTube clips as a data source helps us overcome rank-and-file activists' reluctance to talk to researchers about their views, and enables us to understand political movements "in the streets" (Gattinara and Pirro 2019). In keeping with a grounded theory approach to qualitative research, this type

of data has the ability to reveal what activists consider important (Creswell and Poth 2017) without researchers' intervention and contamination of data. Data derived from interviews, by contrast, risks revealing mainly the issues that are of greatest interest to researchers.

In a high-choice media environment such as South Korea, there is a commensurately high level of selective exposure and bias mobilization, including for citizens who become involved in political movements (Hameleers and Van der Meer 2019; Chang 2018a). Compared to people in other countries, South Koreans tend to have a low level of trust in the media: a cross-national survey conducted by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism in 2020 found that “only twenty-one percent of [South] Koreans trust the news,” which was “the lowest among the forty surveyed countries for four years in a row.”⁴ Like other South Koreans, the flag-carriers draw on the mainstream news as a source of political information, but their primary source of information is conservatively oriented social media, especially YouTube. They also use KaKaoTalk and YouTube to promote their campaigns. For this reason, I supplement the above-mentioned data sources with media reports and opinions expressed through social-media sites such as KaKaoTalk, Band, blogs, and internet cafés.

Contesting the Legitimacy of the Impeachment, Progressives, and the Media

Even during a period of heightened political polarization, the flag-carriers were isolated during the impeachment crisis and its aftermath. South Korean media outlets have a relatively high level of political parallelism in regard to whether they support conservative or progressive parties. It is relatively rare for conservative mainstream media outlets to oppose measures taken by conservative administrations, and yet this was precisely what occurred during Park Geun-Hye's impeachment. All mainstream media found that Park's administration was involved in influence peddling, and even bastions of the conservative media were either critical of Park's involvement or supported her impeachment.⁵

4 TK 2020. Amid this general lack of trust in the media, a separate survey found that South Koreans tended to rate less-conservative outlets—namely *KBS*, *MBC* and *JTBC*—the highest, although the conservative *TV Chosun* was ranked fourth.

5 See e.g., *Joongang Ilbo*. 2017. “사설: 박근혜의 불복 ... 나라 두 동강 내려는가” (Editorial: Park Geun-Hye Rejects the Court Decision ... Attempting to Split the Nation?). March 12, accessed January 21, 2021: <https://news.joins.com/article/21362870>; *Donga Ilbo*. 2017. “사설: 박

The flag-carriers, however, had enormous difficulty coping with the impeachment of President Park. They argued that the process by which Park was removed was illegitimate and they could not accept the legitimacy of Park's successor, Moon Jae-In. A high school student carrying the South Korean flag, one male speaker contended that "the candlelight-holders' madness has had its way and President Park has been dismissed. I can't believe and I don't understand it."⁶ The flag-carriers had support from some conservative politicians. More than two years after Park had been impeached, for instance, Cho Won-Jin, a member of the conservative Our Republican Party (우리공화당), claimed:

Park didn't take any bribes and had nothing to do with any criminal accusation. The Republic of Korea is now stripped of democracy and keeps Park in prison. The left-wingers have ruined the nation. The left and dictatorial politics ignited the *Candlelight coup d'état* and snatched Park's power.⁷

The impeachment was not only a disaster for the flag-carriers because it resulted in the removal from power of their preferred leader; it was also catastrophic because it enabled their arch-nemesis, Moon Jae-In, to assume power. The flag-carriers saw themselves as representatives of the only legitimate political force in South Korea, and thus cast their progressive opponents, chiefly Moon's Democratic Party, as illegitimate. They accused Moon of being an agent of North Korea and promoted the view that North Korean agents had initiated the impeachment process, which they claimed was an act of treason:

Let us be aware Liberty Korea Party and the Democratic Party of Korea are the culprits to have caused the appalling status of present South Korea.

대통령, 대한민국을 위해 고민할 때다" (Editorial: President Park, Time to Think about the Nation). January 18, accessed January 21, 2021: <https://www.donga.com/news/Politics/article/all/20170217/82923763/1>; *Chosun Ilbo*. 2016. "조선일보에 불만 있다: 나라의 내일 걱정하는 정통 보수 언론의 길 되찾아야" (Frustrated with the *Chosun Ilbo*: We Must Return as an Orthodox Conservative Media). December 28, accessed January 21, 2021: https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2016/12/27/2016122702925.html.

6 Speaker A. 2016. "대한문 태극기집회중 고등학생 감동의 명연설" (Great Speech by a High-School Student at the Daehanmun Gate). December 31, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UY05ue9t9VE&t=1s>.

7 W. Cho 2019. "문재인퇴진 태극기집회/대한애국당 조원진당대표의 사자후" (Taegeukki Rallies to Bring Down Moon Jae-in/ Representative of Our Republican Party). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4M3LfZ7qfc>, accessed May 15, 2019.

North Korean collaborators taking direct order from the North have led to Park's impeachment, which was clearly treason by the opportunists.⁸

The flaggers' mindset seemed to remain in the Cold War and unwilling to dialogue with the North Korean regime. It was no coincidence that the flag-carriers brought what is ostensibly a foreign policy matter—relations with North Korea—into their campaign to have Park restored to the presidency, which falls squarely in the realm of domestic politics. Most South Koreans of all political persuasions share a strong desire for reunification with North Korea, although they differ in their views of how to achieve it (cf., Kim 2017a). So it is quite common for political activists, including the flag-carriers, to see inter-Korean relations as an extension of domestic politics. The Kim Dae-Jung (1998–2003) and Roh Moo-Hyun (2003–2008) governments, Moon's progressive predecessors, had promoted dialogue with the North through the Sunshine Policy. Conservatives, such as the flag-carriers, had welcomed the return of a right-leaning government in 2008, and Park's shortened tenure was thus a significant blow to these activists (cf., Chung 2003). The flag-carriers embraced Park's hard-line policies, such as her decision to close the Kaesong Industrial Complex in response to North Korea's nuclear-weapons tests, her calls for Kim Jong-Un to be removed from power, and for the North Korean people to be liberated (Ihm and Yi 2017).⁹ According to a theology student who spoke at a flag-carrier rally, "Kim Jong-Un should be removed, and we need to liberate thirty million fellow North Koreans."¹⁰

The flag-carriers contend that the installation of Moon Jae-In in 2017 was tantamount to South Korea being taken over by the North. According to a flag-carrier in his twenties, South Korea is vulnerable to the North's propaganda. Pro-North Korean "commies," he claimed, had penetrated every corner of South Korean society, such as the teachers' union, and teachers were educating students with new ideas that contradicted what Park Chung-Hee

8 Heo in Yi, Gyu-Taek, Heo Pyeong-Hwan and Lee Gyu-Rhee. 2019. "놀랍다 통영태극기집회 이규택 허평환 이규리연설" (Amazing, Tongyeong National Flag Meeting—Speeches by Yi Gyu-Taek, Hur Pyeong-Hwan, Lee Gyu-Rhee). March 16, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pGVLunZxDdA>. The Liberty Korea Party is now known as the People Power Party (국민의 힘).

9 *Hanguk Kyeongje* 2016. "개성공단 폐쇄, 북한이 핵실험 등으로 파국 자초" (Closing Kaesong Industrial Park, North Korea's Self Inflicting due to Nuclear Tests). February 12, accessed March 11, 2020: <https://www.hankyung.com/news/article/2016021233941>.

10 Speaker B. 2018. "신학대학생 연설 풀·영상·문재인대통령 감도 안되는게-문재인퇴진 범국민대회 태극기집회" (A Theological Student's Speech: Moon Jae-In is Not a Worthy President, National Movement to Bring Down Moon). March 28, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4710JCle7aw>.

told South Koreans decades earlier.¹¹ The flaggers vociferously oppose the use of state power to progressive ends. For example, after Yi Nak-Yeon, Moon Jae-In government's prime minister, requested that government bureaucrats honour the *Candlelight* protesters' expectations by addressing corruption and implementing reform, Choi Ye-Jin, a flag-carrier in her twenties, argued that "bureaucrats can't be the tools to honour the goals of the *Candlelight Revolution*" and noted that "the Chinese government welcomed Choo Mi-Ae, the leader of South Korea's Ruling Party (i.e., Democratic Party of Korea), as an honourable guest to the National Congress of the Communist Party of China" in October 2017.¹²

A homemaker who gave a speech at a flag-carrier rally in February 2017 claimed that "eradicating the commies is the biggest challenge for South Korea,"¹³ while a speaker at a rally held in Tongyeong City in March 2017 complained that he could not sleep for fear that Kim Jong-Un might seize and communize the South.¹⁴ Kim Do-Eun, a theology student, meanwhile, cited Han Sung-Joo, a former general in the South Korean Air Force, to argue that the inter-Korea dialogue needed to stop and the flag-carriers needed to seize the moment to fight back, and rescue South Korea.¹⁵ Ihm Jong-Seok, President Moon's chief of staff, was accused by flag-carriers of being a North Korean agent, and of taking direct orders from the North with the goal of "dissolving the South into the communist North."¹⁶ Kim Do-Eun, a twenty-three-year-old flag-carrier, claimed that conservatives had prevented a communist takeover: "Moon Jae-In is conscious of the flag-carriers' protest and thus slowing down his interactions with the North. Without our protests, Moon Jae-In and Kim Jong-Un must have held hands together and South Korea must have been communized already."¹⁷

11 Speaker C. 2017. "8차 탄핵반대 태극기집회, 애국청년모임 발언" (The 8th National Flag Meeting against Impeachment, Speech by a Patriotic Youth). January 7, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xX9gtL5W7q8&t=4s>.

12 Choi Ye-Jin 2019. "대전 태극기집회, 최예진청년의 조용하면서도 멋진연설" (Flag-Carriers' Protests in Daejeon, Choi Ye-Jin's Calm and Wonderful Speech). December 2, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t3Aon6dKics>.

13 Lee, Su-Mi. 2017. "이수미주부, 태극기집회의 통쾌한 연설, 2월25일 서울역 탄핵반대집회" (Lee Soo-Mi, A Refreshing Speech, Seoul Meeting against Impeachment). February 25, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfANUcoWvXI>.

14 Heo in Yi, Heo and Lee 2019.

15 Speaker B. 2018.

16 Speaker B. 2018.

17 Kim Do-Eun 2018. "23세 청년 김도은대학생 '폭풍연설' 대한문 태극기 혁명 국민운동본부" (23-year-old Kim Do-Eun University Student's Amazing Speech, Daehanmun Gate National Flag Revolution Council). July 29, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oc9QmXqoPqg>.

The flag-carriers interpreted even benign policy choices as somehow serving the interests of North Korea. For instance, they accused Moon of following the North's *Juche* (self-reliance) ideology and using his overseas travels to further the North's interests.¹⁸ Furthermore, while the intention of Moon's plan to decommission nuclear power plants was to address environmental concerns, the flag-carriers saw it as a way for "the commies" to destroy South Korean society. According to Kim Do-Eun, a twenty-three-year-old university student, "We must oppose the denuclearization of the power plants. The denuclearization is a strategy to hand over the South to the North."¹⁹ Some flag-carriers interpreted Moon's claim that South Korea needed to increase government expenditures on social welfare for the disadvantaged as a socialist policy. According to Chae Ji-Min, a twenty-seven-year-old female speaker at one of the rallies,

Young people in their twenties and thirties chose the left-wing party. Why? It was for the sake of standing against the corrupt conservative party. Those young voters were attracted to a left-wing party but will be trashed after their use-by date. The left-wing in power has been found to be North Korean collaborators, using up the national funds in the name of welfare for the people.²⁰

The flag-carriers' refusal to accept the legitimacy of Park's impeachment or Moon's government illustrates the anti-system tendency of the movement: that is, the flag-carriers refuse to accept that the democratic polity had produced an outcome—the removal of their preferred leader, and her replacement with a vilified opponent—that was not to their liking. These anti-system tendencies can be contrasted with the behaviour of progressives in South Korea, who held numerous rallies to oppose measures taken by the conservative Lee Myung-Bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-Hye (2013–2017) administrations. Progressives mainly contested specific policy choices (e.g., the unwillingness of the Lee administration to enact measures to protect South Koreans from allegedly tainted beef imports) and the performance of the government (e.g., Park's aforementioned botching of the rescue of

18 Yi Jae-Ho. 2019. "(리얼)전라도 성지라 불리는 광주 금남로에서 최초로 문재인 깃 그남자!! (이재호)" (The Man Who Accused Moon Jae-In from Kwangju Keumnamro). January 19, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DeAkzjBxoA>.

19 Kim D.-E. 2018.

20 Chae Ji-Min. 2017. "청와대 태극기집회, 채지민 청년부대변인 사이다 연설" (Flag-Carriers' Rally, Speech by Chae Ji-Min, Deputy Spokesperson for Youth). September 2, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vsotcaXjUhM>.

children from the *Sewolho* in 2014), which are matters that can be debated and resolved within the political system. They did not, however, question the elections that brought conservative leaders to power, or their right to rule.

Illustrative of the anti-system tendencies of the flag-carriers was their disproportionate reliance on non-mainstream media.²¹ If we presume that a free press that reports on “the facts” (such as the Park administration’s poor handling of the *Sewolho* rescue) is a vital element of a democratic society, we can understand why these activists are hostile to mainstream media outlets in South Korea and instead rely on alternative sources. The flag-carriers dismiss what the non-conservative segments of the mainstream media present and have created their own news which circulates on social media platforms such as YouTube and KaKaoTalk. A male speaker at the rallies, who reported that he was still in high school, gave voice to this scepticism about the mainstream media when he said that he “just can’t understand why the media cooperates with the [Moon] government’s running the nation. ... People are willing to believe Park received millions in bribes because there is supportive audio-visual evidence and recordings.”²²

According to Lee Gun-Ro, a member of the Council for the National Movement to Vindicate Park Geun-Hye, “South Koreans are floating on a chaotic sea of manipulation under the control of traitors. Do you still believe TV news? Fellow South Koreans are misled. There’re full of lies and the nation is ridiculed.”²³ Han Geun-Hyung, who told the audience during his speech that he was a postgraduate student, found it particularly problematic that young people uncritically accept the news that they read on South Korean internet portals such as Naver and Daum.²⁴ Another flag-carrier insisted that with the distorted media and the influence of communized unions,

21 The same may apply to the progressive counterparts as the Korean mainstream media is not well trusted. Whether there is a matter of degree between the conservatives and progressives is open to debate.

22 Speaker A. 2016. Under the Moon Jae-In government (2017–2022), the progressive citizens had little trust in the conservative media outlets, such as *Chosun Ilbo*, *JoongAng Ilbo*, and *Dong-A Ilbo*. The conservative citizens considered them to be in close cooperation with the nation’s vested interest groups, such as the “haves,” and those prosecutors who were politically leaning rather than neutral.

23 Lee Gun-Ro. 2018. “뉴스타운TV: 청년대표 이군로 학생 애국 연설, 대한문 제13차 탄핵 기각 총궐기 국민대회 태극기집회” (Youth Leader, Lee Gun-Ro Speech, Flag-Carriers’ 13th Demonstration against Park’s Impeachment). March 28, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4710JClE7aw>.

24 Han Geun-Hyung. 2017. “청주집회, 부산대학원생 ‘한근형 애국청년 연설 이야기’ (A Patriotic Speech at Cheongju). February 26, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yU-cqpvDxc>.

the South Korean economy was collapsing, its industrial sector was being destroyed, and small businesses were going bankrupt. The root of these problems, he claimed, was Moon Jae-In, whom the speaker accused of being a spy for North Korea.²⁵

The flag-carriers' speeches thus revealed more than just a deep-seated dissatisfaction with South Korean society following the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye: they did not accept the legitimacy of a political system that was not dominated by the flag-carriers' preferred leaders. As the next section shows, the flag-carriers also attempted to influence the culture—that is, ideas and beliefs—that informed South Koreans in their everyday lives.

Nostalgia, Belief in Fake News, and Irrationality

Cultures consist of a set of commonly agreed norms, which lie in “the realm of intersubjectivity, ideas and ideational influences” (Archer 1996: xiii; cited in de Souza 2014: 146). In South Korea, the ideas that inform the flag-carriers and impel them to oppose the contemporary socio-political transformations occurring in South Korea are unlike those traditionally espoused by conservatives. The flag-carriers are nostalgic for the past and have unconditional respect for former conservative leaders, even though some of these activists were too young to directly experience and remember the industrialization era. Younger flag-carriers who were not even born when Park Chung-Hee was assassinated in 1979 praise the generation which they believe lived through a glorious and important time in South Korean history. For instance, a flag-carrier in his thirties recalled seeing older people in their eighties at Seoul Railway Station in 2016 who were weeping, waving national flags, and passionate about saving the nation.²⁶ A speaker in her twenties said:

We're proud of the older generation's sweat and tears, and their achievement to make South Korea the tenth strongest economy. We're not hungry and anyone can be successful if prepared to work hard. We young people

25 Nam Kwang-Gyu. 2019. “4월3일은 희망의시작| 남광규 매봉통일연구소장 | 114차 창원 태극기집회” (Nam Kwang-Gyu's Speech at Changwon Meeting). March 16, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twlrSSaTtTs>.

26 Yeo Myung. 2017. “(뉴스타운TV) 30대 직장인 대표 여명 애국연설, 대한문 제16차 탄기국 태극기집회” (A Patriotic Speech at Daehanmun Meeting). March 4, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4gtOntvB6Gg>.

live gratefully and are unlike the lefty youth, seeing the world with negative eyes.²⁷

Lee Gun-Ro, who described himself as a conservative youth leader in his twenties during a speech at a flag-carrier rally, maintained that it was important to remember the toils of the industrialization generation, who “struggled with hunger, risking their lives and working for the nation’s modernization. They’re the nation’s heroes.”²⁸ Most South Koreans would generally agree with this sentiment, but a distinguishing feature of the flag-carriers is that they equate the sacrifices of the industrialization generation with conservative leaders such as Park Geun-Hye. The industrialization generation and their young supporters believe that South Korea’s strong economy was solely or predominantly an achievement that can be attributed to Park Chung-Hee and other conservative leaders, and that the Moon Jae-In administration was risking the strength of South Korea’s strong economy by seeking the reunification of Korea under communism. A younger female speaker at a flag-carrier rally, for instance, asserted:

President Park, this is a difficult time for you! You’ve stated you’re married to the Republic of Korea. President Park Chung-Hee saved the nation from poverty and built a proud South Korea. We know you’re the daughter of President Park and the First Lady and we know your love for the nation. We’re proud of you, constantly trying to strengthen the nation that rewards individuals’ hard work.²⁹

Given the respect with which the flag-carriers hold the Park family, it is inconceivable for them that Park Geun-Hye could have been impeached. Most South Koreans, in the view of the flag-carriers, are blind to the fact that Park was innocent. Kim In-Soon, a woman in her forties, for instance, declared:

This holy ground and conservative city of Daegu produced four presidents of South Korea. But we couldn’t protect Park Geun-Hye. President Park Chung-Hee was worried about the nation at the risk of being communized. He built this nation of liberty, peace and a strong economy. However, the

27 Speaker C. 2017.

28 Lee G.-R. 2018.

29 Speaker C. 2017.

young people around us go past us, blocking their ears. They don't know the truth. How sad!³⁰

The speed and extent of South Korea's rare accomplishment of democracy and economic development in recent years can be difficult for some South Koreans to comprehend, but the flag-carriers are particularly committed to conservative values and reluctant to consider the implications of these changes. A coping mechanism for flag-carriers has thus been the consumption and reproduction of fake news about the current state of South Korean politics. In their speeches, they create pretexts for opposing Moon Jae-In, their ideological nemesis, even if doing so means placing much greater trust in foreign powers such as the United States and Japan than in their own government. According to Han Geun-Hyung, a speaker who described himself as a postgraduate student:

American aircraft-carriers have come to the Korean peninsula because war is about to break out. Do you know what the Japanese media said? South Korea is under seizure by the communists, who will impeach President Park and proclaim their legitimacy. This is why James Mattis, the American defense secretary, visited South Korea [in February 2017] to put pressure on the Constitutional Court not to dismiss President Park.³¹

By contesting the impeachment process that consequently brought him to power, the flag-carriers have attempted to deny Moon Jae-In a legitimate place within South Korea's body politic, which they define in terms of freedom. For the flag-carriers, freedom connotes a political system that subscribes to conservative values and opposes communism. One implication is that they expect a hard-line approach towards communist states, namely China and North Korea. Despite being predominantly sparked by the impeachment crisis that took place wholly within South Korea, therefore, a significant portion of the flag-carriers' campaign revolves around denying the legitimacy of North Korea's right to exist. These activists see Moon Jae-In's attempts at dialogue with North Korea as a threat to a free South Korea, and claim that North Korea is not a legitimate interlocutor for peace

30 Kim In-Soon. 2018. "대구태극기집회: 대구 김인순여사의 연설—대구 동화백화점앞" (Kim In-Soon's Speech at Daegu Donghwa Department Store Meeting). December 23, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQMk8myi3Y>.

31 Han G.-H. 2017.

talks (see Yang 2020). They were concerned, therefore, about the summits between Kim Jong-Un of North Korea and Donald Trump of the United States in 2018 and 2019. Cho Won-Jin, the Leader of Our Republican Party, for instance, noted that the party's first goal was to protect a free South Korea. Getting Park and other right-wing leaders released from prison, Cho claimed, was necessary to preserve South Korea's freedom and legal system. Another goal was to eradicate the Kim Jong-Un regime and take over the North under the banner of freedom, and to enable eighty million Koreans to enjoy a happy life in a reunified country.³² The flag-carriers' definition of freedom therefore sets them on an inevitable collision course with democratically elected administrations in South Korea—such as Moon's—who seek to facilitate better relations with the Kim regime in North Korea.³³

Another source that informs the words and actions of the flag-carriers is Christian leaders, especially Reverend Chun Kwang-Hoon, the President of the Christian Council of South Korea. Chun's organization represents about 3 per cent of Christians in South Korea, and he has been in the forefront of right-wing demonstrations against the Moon government. A theology student, for instance, started a speech by referring to former President Rhee Syngman's (1875–1965) last prayer for, and blessing on, the nation. The student labelled progressive religious leaders “pro-North Korea commies” and asserted that Christian ministers who did not denounce Moon's reunification policy were cowardly scoundrels.³⁴ He said that these ministers would be judged by God, and prayed for the Kim regime's collapse, the liberation of his fellow Koreans in the North, and the eradication of those who attempted to destroy South Korea.

The nationalism promoted by the flag-carriers has a strong partisan tinge. It presents the legitimate scope of political ideas in narrow terms, and thereby creates an antagonistic and adversarial dynamic with other political groups. This necessarily reduces the potential for flag-carriers to be effective political agents, as I discuss below.

32 Heo in Yi, Heo and Lee 2019; see also S.-J. Kim (2017).

33 The flag-carriers—along with most other conservative politicians, media and YouTubers in South Korea—greatly trust and cite conservative Korean-American groups and Korea-watchers in the United States as authoritative, reliable and pertinent sources. Those who enjoy their support include Joshua Stanton and Gordon Chang (see Yi 2020), both of whom have advocated a hard-line approach towards North Korea and have been critical of the Moon government's engagement policy.

34 Speaker B. 2018.

Campaign to Free Park Geun-Hye and Spread Fake News

The stated goals of the flag-carriers include protecting democracy, punishing “turncoats and traitors,” and having Park Geun-Hye released from prison.³⁵ A common thread to these goals, however, is the desire to simply “stay-put” or seek morphostasis (cf., Archer 2007), which is unlikely to be achieved. The flag-carriers reserve the right for conservative governments to implement policies that they deem to be legitimate, but deny their progressive counterparts the same right. They see themselves as the sole legitimate repository of South Korean patriotism. As noted in the previous section, the flag-carriers’ progressive opponents also contest key aspects of the policies espoused and implemented by conservatives, but they do not question the patriotism and legitimacy of conservatism per se. The flag-carriers, however, drew a sharp distinction between themselves and their opponents. A high-school student, for instance, told his audience at a flag-carrier rally:

When singing the national anthem and waving the flag, I feel responsible for protecting the nation. My mother’s brother-in-law fought and died in the Vietnam War. Despite his sacrifice, there was no compensation. Those who are protecting the nation should be rewarded. Candlelight holders are attacking those who are working for the nation.³⁶

The Vietnam War ended in April 1975 and the compensation should have been offered to the soldier’s family. It is unclear to which government the student’s 2016 speech is addressed in regard to the non-compensation of the sacrifice of his mother’s brother-in-law. Another goal that the flag-carriers claim they pursue is the restoration of liberal democracy and the capitalist market economy, which they say are at risk of failing. In articulating such goals, the flag-carriers are expressing their beliefs in and seeking to preserve South Korea’s social structure and culture as they were under Park Geun-Hye, and which had their origins in the industrialization era. An important tool in this process is fake news or the dissemination of ultra-conservative opinions through social networking sites such as KaKaoTalk or YouTube, which have been highly effective in mobilizing flag-carriers’ grassroots supporters. In

35 Cho Won-Jin 2019. “문재인퇴진 태극기집회/대한애국당 조원진당대표의 사자후” (Tae-geukgi Rallies to Bring Down Moon Jae-In/ Representative of Our Republican Party). June 8, accessed May 15, 2019: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F4M3LfZ7qfc>.

36 Speaker A 2016.

doing so, some conservative activists have monetized their YouTube channels and at the same time mobilized support for ultra-conservative causes.³⁷

The desire of these activists to “stay put” is also evident in their frustration at their inability to elicit the changes that they want, and their occasional resorting to violence during protests. Their willingness to resort to violence and harassment puts them at odds with most South Koreans, who oppose the use of violence during protests, due to its association with violent incidents at other times in South Korean political history (Kim and Porteux 2019).

Rhetorically too, the speeches I have analysed at times hint at the need for violence to achieve their political goals. An alignment of perspectives between the flaggers and conservative Christians is evident in their shared visceral dislike of Moon Jae-In and anything socialist (Noh 1998; Bae 2010; Jeong et al. 2021). For the flag-carriers, Moon is a “demon” who should be killed, and some even say that his death would aid the South Korean economy.³⁸ It is puzzling to hear those Christians make the harsh public judgement of fellow Koreans. The flaggers blame Moon for pursuing “income-led growth” (소득주도성장론) which, they argue, will destroy South Korea’s capitalist economy, and call for his immediate impeachment.³⁹ Some of Moon’s critics, including members of the National Assembly, had assumed on the basis of Park’s impeachment that Moon too would be impeached before his presidency was scheduled to end in May 2022. Park served four years and nine months in prison and President Moon released Park from imprisonment with a special amnesty due to her ill health on December 31, 2021.⁴⁰ Moon Jae-In ended up serving his entire tenure of five years.

Conclusion

In line with Yang Myungji (2020) findings, analysis of the flag-carriers’ speeches indicates that these activists were unwilling to accept South Korea’s newly configured socio-economic structures. Instead, they have tried to

37 e.g., 신의 한 수 (The Ultimate Key for Success), which is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgOLQwRv1r2m9mhE1tfsn3Q/featured>. On this matter, conservative political parties and their advocates have the same argument against alternative media supporting the views of the progressive party.

38 Kim I.-S. 2018.

39 Heo in Yi, Heo and Lee 2019.

40 Park Geun-Hye published her autobiography at the time of her release from the prison, *그리움은 아무에게나 생기지 않습니다* (Longing Doesn’t Happen to Anyone), 2021. Seoul: Garo-Sero Research Institute.

restore South Korea's past. The ideas and values that inform their worldviews, such as Park Chung-Hee's authoritarian style of rule and growth-oriented economic values with little room for individual rights, are out of step with the mainstream of South Korean society in the 21st century. I have argued that a powerful minority has positioned itself in opposition to the majority, and sees any compromise on its beliefs as repudiating the deeds of the industrialization generation. The political ideology of the flag-carriers is thus *internally* coherent, but the intensity of that ideology has positioned the group on the margins of Korean politics. That is, it limits the flag-carriers' *external* influence in contemporary South Korea.

Despite espousing views that are extreme by the standards of contemporary South Korea, it was not inconceivable that the flag-carriers, and political leaders that they approved of, would regain power in the foreseeable future, which they achieved in the 2022 presidential election. The progressive forces led by President Moon remained in the political ascendancy as of early 2021, but public support for the administration and its policies in areas such as real estate has declined, which was one of the key reasons to lose the 2022 presidential election. Gallup Korea reported in December 2020 that support for Moon's Democratic Party had fallen to 34 per cent, and that of the People Power Party (the newly named major conservative opposition party) had increased to 21 per cent.⁴¹ However, it looked improbable that the conservatives could win the 2022 presidential election due to their continuing setbacks since 2016. However, the long-lasting cartel of the conservative People Power Party, the media, and the Prosecution Service has worked in close cooperation for decades, and they were firmly in support of the former chief of the prosecution office, Yoon Suk-Yeol, who was appointed by President Moon but cut his two-year term short. The conservative party strategically chose him as the party's presidential candidate. As he was elected the 13th president of South Korea, there is a chance that the nation's political and economic democratization could slow down.

Another key finding of the analysis is that support for the flag-carriers may be limited, but it is surprisingly strong among younger South Koreans. Most younger voters in South Korea still tend to prefer progressive

41 Gallup Korea. 2020. "데일리 오피니언 2020년 월간·연간 통합—대통령 직무 수행 평가, 정당 지지도, 정치적 성향 (Daily Opinion 2020: The President's Performance, Support for Political Parties, Political Inclinations)," accessed January 20, 2021: <https://www.gallup.co.kr/gallupdb/reportContent.asp?seqNo=1165>. By way of comparison, in May 2020 support for the Democratic Party was 46 per cent and 18 per cent for the People Power Party.

candidates, but a sizeable minority has been attracted to the ideas that the flag-carriers and other conservatives have promoted.⁴² Part of the answer to why, I suggest, comes down to politics: the flag-carriers, including their younger supporters and activists, fear that a progressive era in South Korean politics was emerging, which would result in further undesirable changes, including closer ties with North Korea. The flag-carriers, by contrast, want the Park Chung-Hee era (i.e., the industrialization era) to remain the defining phase of South Korean politics, and for the progressive administrations of Kim Dae-Jung (1988–2003), Roh Moo-Hyun (2003–2008), and Moon Jae-In (2017–2022) to be treated as unfortunate aberrations. Conservative leaders such as Lee Myung-Bak (2008–2013) and Park Geun-Hye (2013–2017) have based their legitimacy on their personal ties to the industrialization era, which supports the view that this period is quintessential to South Korean conservatives, including younger ones.

A second explanation for why the flag-carriers' nationalism resonates with some younger South Koreans relates to how nostalgia works in practice. As Benedict Anderson and other scholars of nationalism remind us, it is not necessary for people to have directly experienced a particular era for them to wish for it to return. The history of nationalism is replete with examples of national leaders calling for the return of an allegedly glorious but at least partly fictitious past. There is an element of this at play among the younger flag-carriers, many of whom were not even alive during the Park Chung-Hee (industrialization) era, but who have come to believe that the values of that era are worth protecting and reviving. There is an understandable attraction to the vision of an idealized past when South Koreans combined harmoniously to rescue the country from the ruins of war, and to rebuild their economy and society. At a time when younger South Koreans face poor prospects for finding jobs, buying homes, and starting families, it is understandable that some of them might feel a sense of vicarious pride about what they see as the admirable parts of a past era, even if they tend to overlook or downplay the shortcomings and costs of Park's dictatorship. For the March 9, 2022 presidential election, the conservative and progressive parties offered those in their twenties and thirties better life opportunities. The conservative party, the winner, has unfortunately played gender politics for the sake of political gain, which

42 In fact, in the 2022 presidential election, a high proportion of male voters in their twenties supported Yoon Suk-Yeol. According to the analysts of the 2022 presidential election, it seemed that younger voters are least committed to ideology but swing voters for their own benefits.

split those electorates. Younger women were depicted as taking advantage of feminist politics, campaigning to disadvantage younger men. Young men serving in the military service were offered a significant increase in their monthly allowance. The conservative party promised the abolition of the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family.

A challenge for South Korean political leaders will be to respond to issues such as inequality, immigration, and multiculturalism (Yun 2017). These are the future-oriented issues that most resonate with many younger South Koreans, and political leaders should seek to therefore have positions on these concerns. As purported champions of a certain generation of South Koreans, and younger adherents to a conservative ideology, the flag-carriers have the potential to contribute to the development of policies on social and economic inequality, both of which affect people of all ages and ideological beliefs. Notions such as cultural diversity, mutual dependence, and social cooperation were not widely practiced during the era of rapid economic development, and will need to be restored to create a harmonious South Korea (Moon 2018).

Conservatism continues to be a body of political thought that has the potential to inform policy debates in South Korea, but the ideas it offers must be accompanied by political will. It is an open question as to how much adjustment the flag-carriers are willing and able to make in the foreseeable future. That is, they need to decide if they want to contribute to a conservative political movement that can attract the support of a majority of South Koreans, or if they will remain an anti-system force that is content to operate as a vocal but a permanent minority (cf., Kang 2020).⁴³ The evidence presented in this chapter is not encouraging for the prospects of moderation: the flag-carriers have refused to accept the legitimacy of their political opponents, and have positioned themselves as an explicitly anti-system force, in part due to their nostalgia for the Cold War era, and in part due to the dynamics of the impeachment battle. In the absence of moderation, the survival of South Korean democracy itself—a long-professed goal of the flag-carriers—must be in some doubt. This analysis of the emergence and operation of such a reactionary movement in South Korea will contribute to the broader study of contemporary politics in other Asian societies and other regions, where similar movements have emerged.

43 In the 2022 presidential election, the conservative coalition of People Power Party and People Party won the election against the progressive Democratic Party of Korea by 0.7 per cent.

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