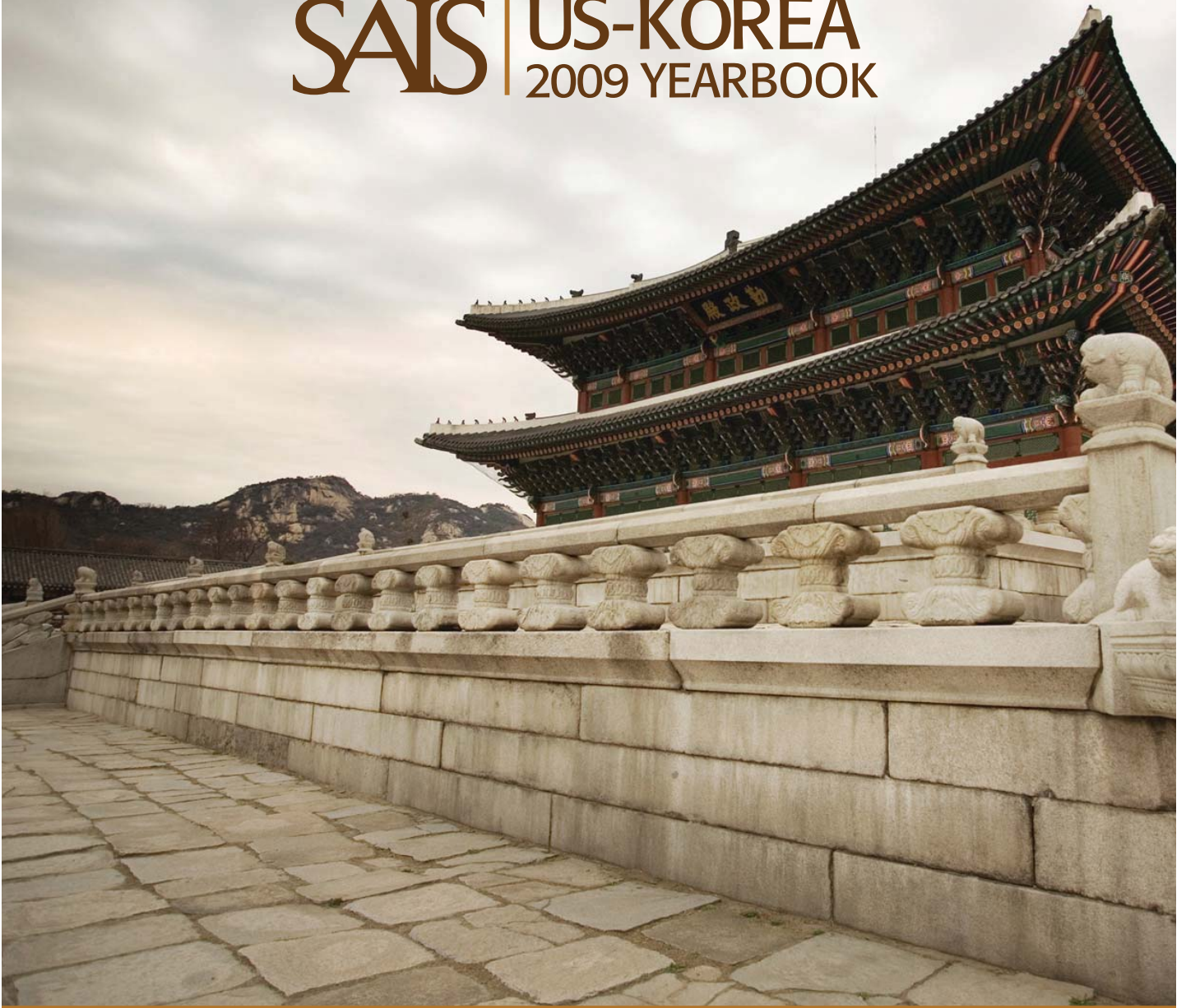


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JOHNS HOPKINS  
UNIVERSITY

## **FINDING THE PUBLIC VOICE IN KOREA'S POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEM**

By Kee Hoon Chung

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

More than 200,000 candlelight vigil protesters and 1,840 NGOs paralyzed the streets around Seoul City Hall from May to August 2008. In those months, the candlelight from the protests illuminated the streets at night and could not be extinguished. From an aerial view, the candlelight spread as protesters spilled over to adjacent streets, and the inevitable clashes with the police escalated as both sides failed to find a nonviolent resolution. Protesters held up signs opposing President Lee's policies, some of them resorting to personal attacks such as "Evil MB (Myung-bak) Policies." NGOs and protesters demanded renegotiation of U.S. beef imports and opposed the increase in private education options and the privatization of government-owned companies. Added to this laundry list of opposition was the group of NGOs opposing the Grand Canal Project, a project spearheaded by President Lee despite some 60 percent opposition from the South Korean public. Like other NGOs, these NGOs went outside the established political framework and participated in the protest to advance their cause.

Less than a year later, the Media Law Revision spearheaded by the President's Grand National Party (GNP) illustrated yet another case in which political opposition went outside the political framework to advance their cause. To prevent the passage of this law, opposition party members snuck into the National Assembly at midnight. Dressed in casual clothing, the opposition party members took turns barricading the entrance to the National Assembly. Eventually, when the GNP members entered the Assembly, the clash between the two sides was unavoidable. From an outsider's perspective, one might not have been able to distinguish the national assemblymen from the angry protesters. And just as with the Grand Canal Project, approximately 60 percent of the public opposed the revision.

In a liberal democracy such as Korea, one might expect strong public disapproval to be addressed through the institutionalized political framework. Indeed, one of the primary indicators of a liberal democracy is a political party system that effectively represents a wide spectrum of constituents' interests. Moreover, such reflection and representation is expected in a parliamentary system such as Korea's, which encourages the establishment of numerous parties to represent broader interest of the constituents and prevent one-party domination. In essence, such a system, which revolves around legislative compromises and negotiations, ensures that the public interest is mirrored and represented at the National Assembly.

As demonstrated by the two cases, however, such representation is seemingly ineffective. In both cases, the political opposition went outside the political framework and engaged in dramatic measures of explosive protest and barricading against the ruling party—the GNP. The clash illustrated that Korea's political system is not effective at representing public interest; this paper will focus on the reasons for that ineffectiveness. While pundits and scholars will posit several explanations, this paper, using the two cases, argues that the power imbalance within the National Assembly in fact creates more incentives to focus on party interest, not the interests of the public. To demonstrate this argument, the paper will first provide the historical context for the origin of the problem, followed by an analysis of the two cases, and conclude with policy recommendations.

## **II. HISTORY**

According to political scientist Lee Yun-kyoung, Korea's current state of ineffective political parties began during the days of the authoritarian President Chun Doo-hwan. During this time, political parties did not advance the interest of the citizens but provided legitimacy and continuity to the authoritarian regime. For instance, the intelligence agency fabricated the existence of an opposition party just to advance such a cause. Under such a manipulative political environment, political opposition at the party level was difficult to form. Instead, political individuals such as Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam led the dissent. Ineffectiveness of the political party system remained, even after the democratization in 1987, as Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam repeated the patterns of creating, merging, and splitting parties to serve their personal political agendas. During this span, parties were used as political capital and as opportunities to fulfill the political ambition of their leaders. As the result,

political parties were ephemeral and unstable, and the political party system could not institutionalize political procedures to resolve social and political problems.

After cycles of merging and splitting political parties, the GNP was founded in 1997 by merging various conservative parties. In 2000, it became the largest political party, and it has retained that status except in 2004, when it briefly lost that status in the parliamentary election, before regaining it next year. The GNP's majority status throughout this decade put the opposition parties in position to naturally collaborate and counter the GNP, with limited success. Today, the GNP holds the majority in the National Assembly with 169 of 299 seats.

### **III. THE GRAND CANAL PROJECT**

#### ***Background***

The Grand Canal Project was President Lee's main campaign pledge before his presidency in February 2008. It entailed creating a shipping route from Seoul to Pusan by connecting major rivers. The project would create more than 500,000 jobs, boost Korean export companies' competitive edge by reducing the cost of transporting goods to other cities, and be a long-term tourist attraction. In order to strengthen his credentials, Lee in October 2006 met with the director of Germany's RMD canal and other experts to discuss the economic profitability and environmental sustainability of a similar canal project in Korea.

Before the presidential election, Lee, as the GNP's presidential candidate, faced opposition from 180 environmental and religious NGOs that demanded an open policy forum to discuss the canal project in depth and verify its environmental sustainability. Due to effective counterstrategy from the GNP, however, the activism did not bear any fruit. During this period, GNP member Chung Kap-yun claimed the NGOs violated election rules by defaming then-candidate Lee. Regardless of the validity of the claim, the charge forced the NGOs to focus and redirect their time and resources to clarifying the charge instead of opposing and investigating the project. Furthermore, the morale of the NGOs was shaken when Chung threatened to rescind the allocated government budget from 47 of the 180 NGOs under charges of misappropriation of funds. As a result, the GNP effectively subdued the NGOs through legal and financial arm twisting and prevented an opportunity for meaningful discussions within a nonviolent setting.



After the election, however, the NGOs gained momentum through a union of college professors who opposed the Grand Canal Project on grounds of economic inefficiency. The group was comprised of 2,466 professors from 115 colleges. It asserted that the Lee administration must approach the issue more rationally and consider the negative economic impact on the public and tremendous benefits to only the construction industry. Opposition further materialized when Seoul National University (SNU) professors formed their own coalition against the project. The fact that the elites sided with the NGOs and not the administration increased the NGOs' legitimacy. Furthermore, support by the elites restored NGOs from the negative image they suffered during the presidential election and freed them from the general conception by moderates that the NGOs' activities were solely politically motivated. The Lee administration was especially taken aback by the elites' support of the NGOs, as it was widely known that most of the elites, especially those from SNU, had supported the president during the campaign.

The challenge to the Grand Canal Project further gained momentum from a working paper series from Kim Byung-ki from OhmyNews and Choi Jin-sup from the Eco Horizon Institute, who had traveled to Germany and met with the same individuals with whom President Lee had met during his visit. They held discussions with experts such as Manfred Krause, who was in charge of MDK, Germany's biggest environmental group, and was also the director of the river project in BUND as well as the vice director of Germany's federal waterway, regarding the feasibility and profitability of the canal. From the discussions, Kim and Choi gathered concrete economic data to refute President Lee's argument that the Grand Canal Project was economically profitable and environmentally sustainable.

Kim and Choi contended the Grand Canal would permanently damage the environment and become an economic loss. According to their report, Germany's RMD had resulted in a deterioration of cultivable land and decrease in farmable land. The report indicated the demand for use of the canal has been decreasing in Europe (from 4% of all goods transported in 1995 to 3.5% in 2005) due to slow speed, which contradicted a key Lee administration assertion. The claim that 500,000 jobs would be created was also unlikely. Even if some jobs were created, they would be construction-related jobs, which few among the educated class desired. In fact, many of those jobs were already vacant in Korea, resulting in firms hiring immigrant workers. At the expense of \$12 billion, the project was neither economically feasible nor profitable. Finally, the report added that the RMD canal was created not for economic reasons but for

political reasons—the result of successful lobbying efforts by the industry.

During an interview with Kim Byung-ki, he noted his report did not attract much attention before the election. According to Kim, it gained more attention after the election as the overall level of attention and scrutiny on the project increased. According to Gallup polls, the professors' union's opposition and the sluggish economy triggered a sharp increase in the public's opposition. Ha Seung-chang, chairperson of the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations, in an interview said the mounting scientific evidence against President Lee's logic of positive economic output kept the momentum growing, which led to the eruption of protests. Eventually, the coalition base expanded and created a larger coalition called the Committee to Oppose the Grand Canal Project, which collaborated with the People's Committee on Preventing Mad Cow Disease and spearheaded one of the largest-scale candlelight vigils in Korea's history.

As the magnitude of the activism reached an apex, the NGOs demanded a list of concessions by June 21 from the president, including a public announcement to cancel the project. If Lee did not comply, the NGOs threatened to heighten the intensity of the protests. President Lee ultimately conceded, announcing that "if citizens didn't want the Grand Canal Project," he would stop pursuing it. Two hours after the announcement, Lee rescinded the \$3 million previously earmarked for research on connecting the different rivers. Moreover, he abolished the subcommittee on promoting Grand Canal Project under the Ministry of Land. He also replaced five staff members identified by the NGOs as key players advocating the project.

Shortly after these concessions, canal-related stocks plummeted, signaling the demise of the project. As *Dong-A Ilbo* reporter Choi Byung-chul reported, "Most media outlets assume that the Grand Canal Project is now completely abolished." Although the protest ended in mid-August 2008, public opinion remained strongly against the project into 2009. Public opinion on the Grand Canal Project changed somewhat during the course of the events. The opposition was low before the election, at approximately 35-40 percent. After the election, however, the opposition rapidly increased, and remained at approximately 60 percent, with some media outlets claiming close to 70 percent opposition. The GNP eventually dropped the Grand Canal Project from its campaign agenda, and shortly after, President Lee again announced he would not pursue the project during his presidency.

### *Analysis*

The main opposition party, the Democratic Party, played a marginalized to nonexistent role in addressing public opposition to the Grand Canal Project at the legislative level. If the opposition parties desired to prevent the Grand Canal Project, three strategies could have been employed within the National Assembly. First, the opposition parties could have limited, amended, or nullified the project's allocated budget. Second, they could have opened an investigative committee to examine the project and taken necessary measures to delay or cancel the implementation. Third, the parties could have passed a resolution opposing continuation of the project to pressure President Lee through disagreement. However, these outcomes were unlikely as the main opposition Democratic Party had only 87 seats in the National Assembly, which did not allow them sufficient political leverage. Even if the Democratic Party somehow managed to persuade all opposition parties, that would total 130 votes, which was still 39 votes less than the 169 seats the Grand National Party possessed. However, even that was an arduous task, as the Pro Park Party and the Progressive Freedom Party, holding 8 seats and 17 seats respectively, aligned more closely with the GNP in their ideologies. Essentially, the imbalance of power between the ruling party and the opposition parties limited the scope for restricting the implementation of the Grand Canal Project.

Even if the opposing parties somehow persuaded a number of the GNP members, the complex nature of budget planning posed further challenges to employing the aforementioned strategies. In the Korean parliament, budget items are not always specified by the project but by sector and industry. Therefore, one would not see an item labeled "the Grand Canal Project" in the budget. Instead, the \$15 billion estimated for the Grand Canal Project would be dispersed to industries related to construction, environment, and administrative functions. In short, it would be almost impossible for the opposing parties to identify and act against each and every budget item related to the project. Even if the opposition parties could somehow have reduced a significant amount of the budget related to the Grand Canal Project, the executive branch's flexible discretionary budget spending would have enabled it to offset the impact. For example, under the construction item, the executive branch could allocate resources from other construction-related items, or even from other budget items.

The absence of tactical maneuvers such as the filibuster system further escalates the effect of the power imbalance in the National Assembly. For example, in the

United States, even if the opposition party is outnumbered by the ruling party in the Senate, as long as the party can muster 41 votes out of 100, it can avoid cloture and employ a filibuster that can perpetually delay voting. Although the opposition party may not be able to nullify that policy, it can force some compromise through such tactics.

With the public strongly opposed to the project, one may assume that the GNP members would feel pressured to respond, therefore aligning with the opposition party to some degree. However, the GNP members appeared unresponsive to the magnitude of the public opinion. Before the election, it was understandable for the GNP members to pass the budget on the Grand Canal Project, because the public opinion on the project before the election was even, with some polling sites even showing a slight favoring of the project. After the election, however, the public opinion against the project rapidly intensified, reaching its apex around June 2008, when some polls showed as high as 70 percent opposing the project, and even the conservative newspaper outlets such as *Chosun Ilbo* reported approximately 60 percent opposition. Despite rising opposition, the GNP members remained inactive in taking any kind of measure to oppose the project.

It is understandable that the GNP members refrained from taking a drastic legislative measure of completely abandoning the project, such as opening an investigative committee on the project, passing a resolution opposing the project, or examining the appropriate usage of the budget. While public opinion is important, national assemblymen also have an obligation to the party, and therefore cannot completely ignore the party's interest. However, the GNP members completely abandoned any legislative measure that necessarily didn't prevent the project, such as passing a resolution to open a forum to address relevant questions. Such passage had no binding effect on the implementation of the policy, and appeared as the optimal choice for the GNP members faced with dilemma of balancing the public and party's interests. However, that did not happen, as the GNP members stuck to their party interests. Essentially, public opinion appeared irrelevant to the GNP, and therefore, the power imbalance within the National Assembly also remained fixed.

In this context, strategizing to confront the Lee administration directly rather than through the existing political framework was a more efficient and effective tool. Therefore the NGOs, to advance their interests, engaged in protests before and after the election instead of reaching out to the political parties. Before the election, the NGOs demanded President Lee to participate in an open policy



forum to verify the environmental sustainability of the project, instead of going through the party channel to advocate for legislation that demanded a rigorous check on environmental sustainability. After the election, they continued to advocate independently, as they expanded their coalition base by framing their argument more in economic terms than environmental ones. Both before and after the election, no signs indicated that the NGOs reached out to the political parties to advance their interests. In the same periods, the Democratic Party protested with the NGOs, as the scope of their activism within the Assembly was limited by the GNP's dominance. Overall, both the NGOs and the opposition parties protested because it presented a greater probability for success than the existing political framework.

#### **IV. THE MEDIA LAW REVISION**

##### ***Background***

The Media Law Revision was introduced by the GNP on December 5, 2008, in the 279<sup>th</sup> National Assembly. After that, public opinion remained fixed, with polls showing strong opposition ratings of 55 to 60 percent, which remained in that range until it passed on July 22, 2009. The GNP emphasized that the revision eased cross-ownership restrictions between television stations and newspapers. If it was passed, major newspapers such as *Chosun*, *Dong-A*, and *JoongAng Ilbos* would be able to own up to 30 percent of the television stations. The revision also encouraged higher foreign ownership, as foreigners would be allowed to own up to 60 percent of Korea's television stations. It abolished limits imposed on corporations owning satellite channels, and allowed corporations to own up to 30 percent of terrestrial channels as well. The GNP claimed the Media Law Revision would create more than 100,000 jobs and enhance the quality of Korea's media industry.

However, opposition parties strongly disagreed with the GNP, arguing that the revision strengthened and extended the conservative influence on not only newspapers, but television as well. Indeed, the revision would allow the three largest and most conservative newspaper companies—*Chosun*, *Dong-A*, and *JoongAng Ilbos*—to increase their influence in television. Furthermore, opponents asserted that corporate ownership of television stations would reduce broadcasting independence and neutrality, because television stations owned by corporations would be subject to the influence of those corporations. Opposition parties were skeptical about the promised positive economic benefits,

questioning the number of jobs that would be created through the revision, since corporations would be more likely to consolidate their businesses.

The inter-party disagreement led to a series of clashes. On December 20, 2008, the opposition parties physically occupied and locked the Cultural Broadcast Communication Committee (CBCC) to prevent the GNP from entering and voting on the revision. The CBCC is one of the two standing committees by which the revision has to be approved before advancing to the National Assembly floor. However, the opposition parties, outnumbered 16 to 8 by the GNP in the committee, knew the revision would automatically pass and resorted to physical occupation.

Unable to process the revision, the GNP requested National Assembly speaker Kim Hyong-o to bypass the standing committees and directly advance the legislation at his discretion. After much debate, Kim announced he would not bypass the standing committees for a direct vote until January 8, 2009. On that day, opposition parties again occupied the National Assembly. In March 2009, the opposition parties and the GNP eventually reached a compromise and formed a bipartisan panel to further investigate the revision. However, the panel discussions had limited success, as the committee members, including NGO representatives, retained strict adherence to their political ideologies. Competition between conservatives and progressives defined the revision from the beginning to end. As a result, the committee published two separate reports.

The clash escalated as each side blamed the other for not keeping its agreed commitments. The GNP claimed the opposition parties agreed to vote in the standing committee after the panel. Opposition parties claimed that since the investigative committee was divided and polarized, detailed public polling must be conducted to further assess public opinion on the revisions. The GNP disagreed, however. GNP National Assemblywoman Na Kyung-won, secretary of the CCBC, claimed the citizens did not understand the complexity of the issue, and in-depth polling would therefore have limited utility.

Both parties sharply disagreed, and ultimately, with only eleven GNP members present, the report published by the GNP from the bipartisan panel passed on June 25, 2009. The revision was now up for vote on the National Assembly floor. Again, this prompted opposition parties to take over and barricade the National Assembly. Attempts at negotiations were made but failed to materialize. Finally, on July 22, 2009, when the assembly was not barricaded as the result of resuming talks between the GNP and the opposition parties, 161 GNP members

covertly entered and locked the National Assembly. They passed the revision without any opposition party members present. Such a voting procedure was subject to constitutional procedural controversy and criticism, as the opposition parties claimed the GNP members voted while the other assemblymen were not present. The opposition brought the case to the judicial court, which eventually ruled and validated the legislation.

Media Action, a group of NGOs opposing the Media Law Revision, was comprised of 48 NGOs. NGOs opposing the revision could not mobilize large-scale protests to influence the GNP. This was mainly because their ability to organize and mobilize large protests was severely curtailed following the Lee administration's successive measures to limit the scope of NGO activities after the protests against the Grand Canal Project. During the Media Law Revision, the Lee administration took measures to prevent protests in central Seoul, where the protests would have had the greatest impact. Ever since the protests against the Grand Canal, police officers had been placed to guard these areas. Although their presence did not necessarily prevent protests, nor had they the legal right to do so, the preemptive measure reduced the NGOs' ability to organize and protest. However, one of the most crucial measures implemented by the Lee administration was to take advantage of the law that required NGOs to register at least 48 hours in advance of a protest. The Lee administration deliberately kept the protest registration full even when there were no protests planned. The administration banned night protests, further decreasing the latitude and possibility of candlelight vigils. Therefore, Media Action relied on alternative strategies that were less effective in educating the audience and collaborating with opposition parties.

The complexity of the issue also made it difficult for Media Action to advocate and relate to the citizens. Media Action argued that the revision would destroy journalistic and broadcasting neutrality by allowing daily newspapers to own television stations. However, one could also argue that the increase in foreign ownership of broadcasting stations could actually promote neutrality. The complexity of the issue prevented NGOs from building the kind of momentum they did when they opposed the Grand Canal Project.

The Grand Canal Project case showed that citizens are likely to be more interested or involved in issues that pertain to their daily life. In the Media Law Revision case, although economic implications were at stake, the stake was not as tangible to citizens' daily lives because the revision had no relationship to actual taxes paid. Furthermore, Media Action emphasized the political aspect—

the retrenchment of democracy—which was not aligned with the public's stronger reaction to issues relating to their daily lives.

### *Analysis*

As with the Grand Canal Project, even though 60 percent of the public opposed the Media Law Revision, the opposition parties lacked political leverage to represent the public opposition at the National Assembly. In both subcommittees, including the Cultural and Broadcast Communication Committee (CCBC), the GNP held more votes than the opposition votes combined. In the general assembly, it was the same story; the GNP controlled the assembly with 169 out of 299 seats, which meant legislative compromise was not a requirement. Although the Progressive Freedom Party, with 16 seats, announced its disapproval of the revision, that still left the vote count unchanged. Moreover, without any legislative maneuver such as the filibuster, the GNP really had no incentive to harvest any legislative compromise with the opposition parties. As the last resort, the opposition parties had no choice but to engage in disruptive behaviors such as locking and barricading the National Assembly to prevent the revision from passing. The opposition parties resorted to such behavior because it was the only available strategy with the possibility of any success. In fact, such behavior led to brief moments of success, as it delayed the revision from rapidly advancing to the National Assembly. Originally, the GNP desired to advance the revision before January 2010. It also led to the creation of a bipartisan panel examining the revision, although the panel was ineffective in reducing the ideological differences between the two sides. These successes, however, failed to change the final outcome or create a compromise on the contents of the bill.

The strong public opposition, much as with the Grand Canal Project, appeared to have no impact on the behaviors of the GNP. Kim Hyong-o, a former GNP national assemblyman, decided to bring the revision for direct vote on January 8, 2009, despite strong opposition from the public. Additionally, on July 22, he exercised his prerogative as the speaker to convene the National Assembly session without any opposition members present, despite knowing how unpopular such action would be. Not only was it unpopular, but also posed significant political risk for the speaker, as the process eventually was subject to judicial review, and criticisms would be thrown at the speaker for instigating that controversy. As for the GNP members, they passed the findings of the bipartisan commission, and eventually 161 of them voted for the revision. Incredibly, no members opposed the revision, illustrating yet another case in which the GNP



members chose party loyalty over public interest.

The incentive for such loyalty to the party remains a puzzle. All 161 GNP members who voted for the revision faced the political risk of losing votes from their constituents in the next election. Knowing this, they must have calculated that party loyalty was politically more rewarding than following public interest. In the same context, Kim Hyong-o faced perhaps even greater political risk than the GNP members, as the sole blame could fall on the speaker for directly introducing the revision to the floor in first place. Despite such risks, the entrenched loyalty illustrated by the GNP speaker poses the question of what incentives would lead him to act in such way.

Nevertheless, the party allegiance of GNP members implies that they were determined to pass the revision despite opposition from the public. Indeed, if public opposition as high as 60 percent could not influence the preference of the GNP, one wonders what can. The secretary of the CBCC from the GNP, Na Kyung-won, went as far as to claim that the polls were inaccurate because the majority of the citizens did not actually understand the full complexity of the issue. Moreover, many GNP members, including Na, asserted that as politicians, they must at times pursue a course of action unpopular with the public in order to promote national interest. Furthermore, a reporter from the progressive newspaper *Pressian* said that “the Grand Canal Project was President Lee’s own agenda. However, the Media Law revision has been the GNP’s primary platform for so long that regardless of public opinion, as long as the President is from the GNP and the GNP has the majority, the revision will pass.” In fact, the revision was outlined in the GNP’s strategic handbook, seventh and eighth editions, whereas the Grand Canal Project was not. All these findings implied that from beginning to end of the passing of the legislation, public interest was not an issue. Instead, these findings demonstrate the GNP’s determination to pass the revision, illustrating the diverging interests of the party and the public.

## V. CONCLUSION

This paper has demonstrated that single-party domination is the main cause hindering representation of public interest in South Korea’s political party system. The power imbalance within the National Assembly in both the Grand Canal Project and the Media Law Revision led to advocacy outside the political framework, because the GNP had no incentive to strike a legislative compromise. As the result, only the GNP’s interest—not the interests of the

general public—was represented at the National Assembly. This paper is not, however, exhaustive, as it incorporates only two cases. Further research examining more cases would solidify the claim and provide important implications for consolidating Korean democracy.

Whether one is identified as progressive or conservative, the common goal needs to be the development of an effective political party system that better represents public interests. Illustrated by the two cases, there is a wide gap between public interest and politicians' representation of the public within the political setting. Reducing that gap should be the next step in consolidating South Korean democracy. Since its democratization in 1986, South Korea has made numerous improvements, such as free elections and enhanced human rights. However, one dynamic remains fixed compared to the days of the autocratic regime—the ineffective party system that often fails to represent the public interests. Since the National Assembly has two functions—as the public's representative and trustee—it should not have to vote in accordance with the public's desire all the time. However, when the National Assembly decides to vote against the public interest, there should be an accountability mechanism that would result in some form of political repercussions. The GNP, with such mechanism absent, can pass legislation at the expense of losing popularity, but not political security, as the National Assembly speaker and the GNP members appear unafraid of repercussions of going against public opposition.

What allows the GNP members to ignore the repercussions remains a puzzle. Ignoring public opinion as high as 60 to 70 percent does not help the prospect of reelection, as the constituents can vote them out of their office. Essentially, following party loyalty rather than public interest must have provided the GNP members with greater political benefit. One possible explanation for this political calculation relates to regional politics in Korea, which overwhelmingly favors the conservatives, the GNP. In those areas, winning the primary is equivalent to winning the election, based on past voting behaviors favoring the GNP. Therefore, the GNP members from those districts would have incentives to follow the party's interest, not the interests of people. However, this is only a hypothesis, and requires further evidence, as a point of contention remains. Even if regional politics prevailed, not all 161 GNP members who voted for the revision come from conservatively bent areas. Therefore, the question remains, what incentives did the rest of the GNP have in following the party's interest? Identifying that cause is not only significant for consolidation of Korean democracy, but also useful for theoretical and academic purposes as well.



U.S.-Korea Institute at SAIS  
1740 Massachusetts Avenue N.W.  
Washington, DC 20036  
[www.uskoreainstitute.org](http://www.uskoreainstitute.org)



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