

Session II

The Wounds of War and Separation /
Defection from the North and
Ideological Struggle in the South

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Social Conflict in Divided Korea and Action Plan for Peace

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South Korea had been governed by a series of authoritarian regimes since the end of the Korean War in 1953. Under the iron fists of authoritarian regimes, except for the political challenge for the democratization, other social conflicts were suppressed and could not be expressed. However, the June Democratic Struggle of 1987 opened a wide path for social conflicts to explode. Once freed from the tight control of authoritarian regimes, social conflicts in a divided society began to be intensified, especially after the power change of 1997. The historical inter-Korea summit of 2000 surely alleviated the conflict between north and south Korea, but it aggravated conflicts within south Korea coining a new phrase of “south-south conflict.”

Korean peninsula is a place where the Cold War is still going on, even though it came to an end almost two decades ago in other places of the world. Now Korean peninsula is facing a new opportunity to construct a peace regime, settling down the prolonged international conflict surrounding the nuclear issue. Contrary to this soothing atmosphere, the south Korean society witnesses growing south-south conflict surrounding its policy toward north Korea. This paper will trace the historical background of current south-south conflict within the south Korean society.

I. The Suppression and the Explosion of Social Conflicts - Its Historical Background

1. Road to the Division and the War in Korea

Korea was divided by foreign powers. Internal actors or factors were totally

excluded from the secret decision to divide Korea. It was foreign powers who were responsible for the division of Korea. However, it is true only when we are talking about what happened in the fatal year of 1945. As Korea underwent the Korean War and the consolidation of the separate regimes, there emerged substantial forces who had embedded interests in the division of Korea. In short, there have been many people who make money from and live along with the division system. This kind of people does not exist only in the privileged upper class. The broad existence of people who have entrenched interests in the division system means that the unification of the Korean peninsula is not an easy task.

All societies have ideological confrontation between the right and the left, and they find their own ways of settling down conflicts within their society. In Korea's case, the ideological conflict immediately after its liberation in 1945 was magnified by the direct intervention of the two superpowers – the United States and the Soviet Union. The ideological conflict in Korea was not limited to an usual instance of struggle between the left and the right. It soon developed into a symbolic proxy war of the Cold War that had started on worldwide level.

If it was a game within a certain state that resorted to mobilization of limited resources, the outcome would be attained anyway: but if the game grew into an unlimited struggle because of the intervention of the two superpowers, it would not be easy to see the consequence of the game. In north and south Korea, respectively, a separate regime emerged, modeling after its own occupying superpower. The competition and the confrontation between the two separate regimes developed into a desperate war in 1950. Fortunately the Korean War did not leap to a Third World War, the tragic power of the war was strong enough to shake the fate of all the people in Korea.

Usually, many people regard the conflict between the left and the right in liberated Korea as an ideological struggle. Underneath of its surface, however, there existed the issue of the purge of the pro-Japanese collaborators. For example, Kim Ku was an ultra-rightwing political leader, but he made efforts to join hands with north Korean communists to avoid the emergence of separate systems alongside the 38th parallel. The United States excluded Kim Ku in spite of his ideological stance as a rightwing leader because he was a true leading nationalist who would not sacrifice the interest

of the Korean nation to protect his ideological position. Those Koreans who served as Japanese high police were to be purged as national traitors in a normal condition. Yet they transformed themselves into rightwing warriors and flagmen of anti-communism, taking advantage of the left-right confrontation. Kim Ku, who dared to devoted himself to the negotiation with north Korean communists to avoid the consolidation of the division, was assassinated by pro-Japanese elements.

One thing that we must remember in discussing social conflict in liberated Korea is the fact that the Korean people did not have chance to accumulate experiences of suitable ways of conflict solution. Of course, the disaster of the division was not a problem which could be handled with a certain skill of conflict resolution. However, the lack of experiences of conflict solution or experiments of democracy worked as catalyst in the course that the division's leap into the outbreak of the Korean War. Like many other countries which had bitter memories of being colonized, the seed of the spontaneous modernization was rooted out and the imperialist power imposed modern institutions in Korea. The traditional elite were marginalized – if not totally devastated -, and traditional ways of conflict resolving were replaced by modern – but coercive – ways of imperialism. The Japanese who did not allow Koreans to have political parties or associations, and there was almost no room for the self-rule movement which was based on dialogue and compromise with the imperialist rulers. Instead, Koreans underwent their political socialization through attempts for revolution and armed struggle. These colonial experiences urged Koreans to choose “solution of conflicts with arms” without hesitation in liberated Korea.

2. The Korean War and Massacres

North Korean leaders dreamed the liberation of the south Korea by armed forces. In June, 1950, they launched a whole-scale attack alongside the 38th parallel. This initiative was very effective, and soon north Koreans occupied and ruled more than ninety percent of the territory and the population of south Korea. However, the counterattack of the UN Forces was also effective, and with the success of the Incheon Landing led by General McArthur, the north Koreans had to retreat. This time, Rhee Syngman and General McArthur were not satisfied with the recovery of the status quo, and wanted to take advantage of the situation and ordered their troops to march to the north to unify Korea. This rollback policy shows that Rhee Syngman and

General McArthur, like Kim Il Sung, started their own unification war. The UN Forces and the ROK Army occupied ninety percent of the territory and the population of north Korea. However, the Chinese intervention nullified the victory of Rhee and McArthur and their attempt to unify north Korea by military forces proved to be a disaster. In July, 1953, the United States, China, and north Korea concluded a truce treaty. It was merely a prolonged ceasefire, not the end of the war. The Korean War did not end, yet it is awkward to say that the war is still going on. This equivocal situation has continued for more than fifty years. The protracted confrontation of the north and south Korea respectively created friendly conditions for the emergence and the stability of authoritarian regimes.

Before and during the Korean War, there were large-scale migrations between north and south Korea. From north to south, about two millions of landlords, Christians, and pro-Japanese collaborators migrated. In addition to them, many ordinary people who were intimidated by the U.S. bombing moved to the south. Many leftist elements and young people of the south moved to the north. Many of them moved to the north as members of the voluntary army. The number of the people who moved from the south to the north were about 700 thousands. These kinds of inter-Korean migrations strengthened the rightwing and weakened the leftwing in the south, and vice versa in the north. The exchange of the short-term occupation of enemy's territories, the north and the south authorities enjoyed some side-effects of the disclosure of potential sympathizers of the enemy. When the Korean War ended, the south Korea became a land of ultra-rightwing anti-communist society, and the north became a monolithic communist society which had eliminated the seeds of potential resistance.

The Korean War resulted in the massive loss of lives. Unfortunately, it was civilian damage which took the majority among the loss. Many civilians were not killed by bombing or by stray bullets during combats: many unarmed civilians were killed by soldiers and militias in non-combat situations. It is known that the number of victims was as many as one million, and at least 80 percent of victims were killed by south Korean soldiers, policemen, or members of rightwing militias.

3. The Developmental Dictatorship

The Western European history shows that the industrialization brought totally new

type of acute conflicts which were not experienced in traditional societies. It was also true in Korea. In the south Korean society, however, conflicts resulted from the industrialization had been latent and could not be openly expressed or exploded. The only conflict which could be openly expressed during the developmental dictatorship period was the political conflict surrounding the quest for the democratization. Many people thought that other conflicts could only be raised after the achievement of the democratization.

In Korea, opposition parties were usually more conservative than ruling parties. In divided Korea, the major party system was maintained as the competition between two conservative parties. The interests of the working class or the minjung were not to be represented in the parliamentary politics. It was more difficult for the working class to organize themselves and raise their voice in the society. Under the notorious National Security Law, it was dangerous to organize a trade union, and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, the upper organization of existing trade unions were under tight control of the government. Through the industrialization initiated by the developmental dictatorship, the Korean society faced with new types of conflicts. However, the politics of terror exercised by the KCIA and other secret agencies make the new conflicts remain dormant.

The industrialization under the developmental dictatorship in Korea corresponds to the late-late-industrialization. The industrialization and the urbanization in Korea occurred very quickly. The speed was much faster not only than that of the advanced capitalist societies but also than that of German or Japanese societies which belong to cases of late-industrialization. The industrialization and the urbanization, that took place in Western Europe for a prolonged period of two or three hundred years, occurred in Korea within a generation.

The rapid and compressed development resulted in unequal growth and time lag between the economic development and socio-cultural development. Since the Korean society which did not go through thorough transitional mechanism from one period to another period, negative legacy of a previous period remained in large scale. The weird coexistence of pre-modern, modern, and postmodern elements characterizes the rapid social changes that the Koreans underwent.

4. The Democratization and the Expression of Social Conflicts

Under the military dictatorship, social conflicts remained latent in Korea. Nevertheless, immediately after the opening of a path to the political democratization, the social conflicts which had been suppressed for decades exploded in a moment. The June Democratic Struggle of 1987 obtained the political concession of the military regime and the people witnessed their own power. The working class who experienced magnificent political awakening did not satisfied with the political achievement of constitutional change of direct presidential election, and raised their voice in economic and social areas. Once expressed, nothing could obstruct the explosive demand of the working class. Within the decisive three months of July, August, and September of 1987, there emerged more than three thousand trade unions, as many as the total number of trade unions organized after the end of the Korean War. It was an unpredictable explosion of hitherto suppressed anger, frustration, dissatisfaction of workers against the unequal distribution and the contempt.

This struggle shook the whole Korean society. The workers themselves were amazed by their own influence over the society; capitalists regretfully admit that the workers would not be docile any more just following the control of the state and the capital; probably it was the middle class who showed the most dramatic change of attitude with the explosive advance of the working class. The June Democratic Movement was successful in achieving political democratization because it could have made one voice. However, the middle class became agitated when they saw the angry outburst of the working class. A political cleavage was unavoidable.

The eruption of suppressed conflicts was not limited to the conflict between the labor and the capital. After long silence forced during the military dictatorship, various social conflicts began to be expressed in a new legal and open theater.

The Korean society only witnessed the beginning of political democratization and the organization of the interest groups, but it did not have a consensus for a method of conflict resolution, or any experiences in harmonious settling down of serious conflicts. Without any buffering mechanism, each interesting group began to confront with one another. Since the parliament and political parties did not worked well, the presidential election which was to be held by every five years emerged as the main theater that

all the issues and conflicts were raised. In a certain way, it meant institutionalization of social conflicts with the development of democratization. However, it also meant that in a situation that other mechanism for mediation or resolution of social conflicts did not operate well, the presidential election must be overheated.

Any society has social conflicts and it also has their own way of resolving social conflicts representing its own tradition and historical background. In Korea, even though the experiment of democracy for almost two decades, still the way of managing and resolving social conflicts is immature. It seems that it resulted from the terrible experiences of 'extermination' of opponents and competitors during the Korean War period, instead of living and working together with them based on the coexistence and the tolerance.

II. The Division and the Ideological Conflict

An important characteristic of the recent ideological conflict is the legacy of successful 'extermination.' Although there are many countries that experienced political massacres under authoritarian regimes, Korean cases are unique in some ways. Partly because of the division and partly because of the nature of the Korean War that the frontline shifted several times, the cleansing effect of political massacres thorough. In south Korean society, there was no room for leftist elements to express their ideological orientation. Anti-communism in south Korea became more and more extreme. Competitively, people began to use stronger words: they were not satisfied with the simple term of pangong (anti-communism), some people used the term of sŭnggong (victory over communism), and myŏlgong (extermination of communism)

In an ultra-anti-communist society, even liberalism was regarded threatening. In 1959, Cho Pong-am, ex-presidential candidate of the Progressive party, was hanged because he advocated the "peaceful" unification of Korea. Communist north Korea should be annihilated, then those who advocated peace with communists was a spy. That was the simple logic of ultra-anti-communist dictators.

It was after the Kwangju massacre of 1980 that ideological conflict resumed. It was

a shock that the United States supported the military leaders who ordered the mass killing in Kwangju. Young radicals cast questions that what was the United States to us, and embraced socialist ideology as a weapon to fight against the military dictators and their big brother, the United States. The re-emergence of ideological conflict was accompanied by generation conflicts between the established generations that are tinged with anti-communism, militarism, and statism, and new generation who was born after 1960.

The military dictatorship attempted to regulate those young radicals with the National Security Law. These processes, which were usually done by the KCIA, the Security Command, and the secret police, were accompanied by merciless tortures. In 1980s, the KCIA and the similar organizations often released press announcement that they arrested a spy ring case. However, after the democratization, those “spies” claimed that their cases were forged by the government by torture. In the 1980s, there were also cases of ‘missing’ and ‘suspicious death.’ These cases and other human rights violations and state terror composed the demand for the erection of the transitional justice. The issue of the erection of the transitional justice became an important aspect of current ideological conflicts.

In 1997, Kim Dae Jung was elected as president. It was the first power shift by election in modern Korean history. Kim, who had run for presidential election as early as in 1971, became the main target of military dictators and labeled as ideologically dangerous person. To clear this groundless charge, he usually suggested very cautious economic policies. However, his so-called ‘Sunshine’ policy toward north Korea, was comprehensive and progressive. In June, 2000, he visited north Korea and met Kim Jeong Il. This historical inter-Korea summit was welcomed by most people, however, those extreme rightwing who had embedded interests in the division system did not like this bold step toward the alleviation of the north-south conflict. They worried that the reconciliation and peace would seriously undermine their stances in south Korean society based on the confrontation and the tension between the north and the south.

As soon as the deep impression of the hug of the two leaders faded away, the ultra rightwings launched their attack against the trend toward the reconciliation between the north and the south. The inauguration of the Bush administration which define the

north Korean regime as 'the axis of evil' encouraged them. Conservative medias coined a new phrase of 'south-south conflict.' The south-south conflicts usually mean the conflicts within the south Korean society surrounding the direction of the policy toward north Korea.

The Presidential election of 2002 intensified the south-south conflicts. Especially because of the death of two middle school girls by the U.S. armored motorcar, the unequal Korean-American alliance became a heated issue in the campaign. The conservatives were pretty sure that they would win the election. The situation seemed quite different from that of 1997, when they had many decisively negative factors for the election. However, the conservative lost the election again, and they became very anxious.

This anxiety made them gather together and take action to put an end to the new government led by Roh Mu Hyun. The result was the impeachment of 2004. However, Korean citizens did not want to kick Roh out of his office and gave him another chance. Although his neo-liberalist policies provoked harsh opposition from his ex-supporters, in 2007, he had an inter-Korea summit with Kim Jong Il, seven years after the first summit in 2000. (to be continued)