Digital Populism in South Korea? Internet Culture and the Trouble with Direct Participation

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The penetration of the Internet in Korean society is usually seen as a positive development, perhaps even a model for other countries; more efficient bureaucracy, more political figures making use of political blogs, and greater opportunities for citizen participation seem to connect government and citizens in a mutually beneficial way. Nevertheless the past six months have witnessed events resulting from an impersonal and seemingly uncontrolled Internet-based social mobilization that casts the shadow of the effects of unmediated online activity on social and political life: a vehement series of protests against the signing of the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement in April, which led to the resignation of several senior officials and ministers in the new Lee Myung-bak administration and a number of deaths of Korean celebrities as a result of smear campaigns mounted and spread across the Web.[1] Although the latter episodes do not fall within the realm of politics, such suicides nevertheless raise the issue of whether a state should somehow regulate the free flow of information.

Discussions of the role of the Internet in politics (and society) have dominated the Korean media during the past few months. Surprisingly, the debate has yet to reach academia. In fact, the link between Internet activity and populism, as this type of behavior has been referred to in popular parlance (without proper reference to the academic use of the term) is underexplored both theoretically and empirically. To be sure, both populism and Internet-based sociopolitical action have been the objects of academic study. There is a considerable body of literature on populism, its ideological underpinning, and its empirical

manifestations with regard to both West and Central Europe and Latin America.[2] Research on Internet technology has focused on the information divide between the rich and the poor and the educated and the less educated, and also on the positive or negative effects of technology on politics, namely e-government, electoral campaigns, or Internet discussions.[3]

We know surprisingly little, however, about how populist movements and leaders make use of the Internet for political ends. The issue itself is far from new, as occasional debates among netizens in East Asia over national sentiments (the dispute over the Dokdo Islands between South Korea and Japan, for example) dominate the Web. Online discussion boards are often instruments for sparking street demonstrations or even shaping electoral campaigns. This paper constitutes an explorative attempt to make sense of the type of behavior—primarily the candlelight vigils in the spring in 2008—that took place in South Korea; it is undertaken in order to understand the role that the Internet and Internet culture play in politics. By doing so, this paper also seeks to conceptualize "digital populism" as a new type of political behavior marked by the political use of the Internet as both a form of political participation and an instrument of mobilization.

There seems to be a paradox in the highly technological societies of East Asia, and in Korea in particular. On the one hand the decline of the mass party and its role in linking elites with citizens and a decreasing electoral turnout have led some to point to a lack of participation and interest of ordinary people in politics. On the other hand, with the rapid development of information technology, citizens are getting more involved in political discussions. The candlelight vigils in South Korea in the spring of 2008 well illustrate the mobilizing power of online blogs, chats, and discussion boards that sparked street demonstrations against the government policy of approval of a free-trade agreement (FTA) with the United States. The candlelight vigils[4] led to administrative shuffles (three ministers replaced) and the appointment of new presidential senior advisers (seven senior presidential secretaries out of eight were replaced). Given that most of the original appointments were fewer than three months old, this was no minor event in Korean politics. Direct participation is having an effect on representative democracy.

The April 2008 FTA Deal and the Wave of Popular Protests

In early April 2008 the United States and South Korea signed an FTA after months of intense negotiation.[5] While this was heralded by the officials of the two parties as a way to take the already significant trade volume between the two countries to a new level, reaction on the streets of South Korean cities suggested that many were unhappy with the deal.[6] On the Korean

side, concerns focused on the possible resulting lack of competitiveness of South Korean businesses although the scrapping of tariffs would ensure that companies such as KIA, Hyundai, Samsung, and others would benefit from easier access to the U.S. market.

The FTA decision sparked a large wave of nationwide strikes, rallies, and demonstrations. While street protests have led to clashes with the police (which continued until late July 2008), what is interesting to note is the role played by the Internet in mobilizing ordinary people against the deal and, as a result, against the government (forcing senior aides to the president and ministers to re-sign).

South Korea is among the most wired societies in the world, and the importance of online networks has gained increased prominence not only in social relations (online games, PC rooms, online dating, cyberblogs) but even in public life. The Roh Moo-hyun administration owed a lot of its support to netizens. Political support expressed on the Web greatly contributed to the election of Roh Moo-hyun in 2002, and when the opposition sought to impeach him in 2004 the widespread popular furor hit not only the streets but especially the Internet as a thunderstorm.

The 2008 protests, the peculiarities of the current situation notwithstanding, started similarly, namely, through an Internet-fueled mobilization, with its new language (for example, 2MB and Agorians[7]). Popular participation and direct action grew as a result of the facilitating role of the Internet and online networks, which reduce transaction costs and reach wider audiences than traditional means. But is this direct democracy or is it Internet-induced street mobbing?

The lack of popular participation in public life is often lamented in modern democracies. That more and more citizens become interested in what happens in their countries should be obviously seen as a welcome development. At the same time, however, the current wave of protests and the modus operandi of the protestors have worrying implications for democratic systems. The Internet allows quicker and easier contacts among citizens of any country. More crucial (and troubling) is that the spontaneous, uncontrolled flow of information and prompt response have two important consequences: first, reliance on official sources of information dramatically decreases as people tend to rely on unverified information freely available online; second, an emotional approach to politics replaces a more rational one.

Any type of information, whatever its reliability, prompts an immediate and emotional reaction. The current FTA protests are a case in point. Compared with citizens who rely less on the Internet, netizens are less concerned about pondering the advantages or problems associated with the introduction of an FTA between South Korea and the United States, and they seem more eager to

express or channel their anger against the authorities, whatever their actual faults. This targets one of the pillars of a democratic system: the fact that representatives are, in fact, just representatives—elected officials who, for a fixed period of time, govern the country and are eventually accountable to the electorate. This new type of politics, hereafter called digital populism, calls for a renegotiation of the putative contract between electors and elected.

What Is Populism?

The issues of direct representation and popular participation lie at the very center of populist appeals because "deliberations and secret elections [are] redundant impediments to a direct expression of the popular will.[8] "Populism offers a dichotomous vision of politics and society that places the people in opposition to political elites whose legitimacy is questioned. Europe and Latin America have a long history of populist leaders and parties, and even East Asia has had its fair share of populist leaders: former presidents Chen Shui-bian (of Taiwan) and Roh Moo-hyun (South Korea) and former prime minister Junichiro Koizumi (Japan) have been often characterized as such, often more because of their style of leadership than out of substance.

Scholarship on the subject of populism indicates a pre-supposition of a clear and antagonistic dichotomy between the "pure people" and the "corrupt elite";[9] as a solution, populism proposes an unmediated link between the people and the leader,[10] thus leading to unmediated popular sovereignty.[11] Abts and Rummens argue that populism is mainly concerned with direct participation of "the people." In this light, "deliberations and secret elections" are "redundant impediments to a direct expression of the popular will".[12]

Defining populism is by no means easy. The concept of populism is "difficult and slippery".[13] As a type of behavior, populism has involved various segments of the population, ranging from elites to ordinary people. Often they are not united by strong or cohesive ideological glue (values or interests). The term populism is often used to highlight movements and phenomena that occur from the extreme left to the extreme right end of the ideological spectrum. Taggart describes populism as "an episodic, anti-political, empty-hearted, chameleonic celebration of the heartland in the face of crisis".[14] For Taggart it is a combination of "a movement, leader, regime or idea",[15] and Taggart also notes that "populist movements have systems of belief which are diffuse; they are inherently difficult to control and organize; they lack consistency; and their activity waxes and wanes with a bewildering frequency".[16]

Populism can comprise both elite-driven and mass-initiated political action. For elites, populism has been actively used (or they have been accused of using it) when they tried to attract ordinary people's support. Populism has been seen in many cases in Latin America as well as in many recent popular

political leaders such as Tony Blair (in the United Kingdo m), Koizumi, and Roh. Some populists do not mind being called populists.[17] Abts and Rummens identify three main characteristics of populism.[18] First, it entails an antagonistic relationship between "the people" and "the elite".[19] Mudde also defines populism as "an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite,' and which argues that politics should be an expression of the volonté générale [general will] of the people".[20]

Second, populism calls for the restoration of popular sovereignty. Populism favors direct democracy, as populists believe democracy should be derived from the power of the people. This ideology based on the people guides populists to reject representative democracy and delegitimize established elites. Zaslove maintains that populist emphasis on popular sovereignty is dangerous, as this threatens "pluralism and democratic representative institutions".[21]

Finally "the people" are understood as constituting a "homogeneous unity".[22] The people are a "non-plural, virtuous, and homogeneous group[s] that are part of the 'everyday' and the 'normal' core of the country".[23] The people being one, it can only have one voice. This reinforces the us-versus-them antagonism that can even lead to overthrowing the established political order.

When Populism Meets Digital Technology

When populist activities take place in a highly developed information technology environment, populism acquires a critical tool that can ease recruitment of like-minded people and mobilize them as well as further intensify social antagonism and witch-hunting behavior. So, when populism meets digital technology, the meeting engenders three main effects that are politically relevant.

First, for the politicians or populist activists the use of the Internet as a political tool provides low-cost (or even free) access to the grassroots, the potential ordinary supporters and voters. Transaction costs are lowered (compared with costs for ordinary recruitment), and the reliance on online networks potentially yields a greater mobilizational capacity as it reaches out to more people at the same time.

Second, the unmediated nature of the means (open discussion boards, chats, and blogs) can lead people to freely and promptly respond to an event or make a comment without pausing for reflection or, more crucially, pausing for acquiring sufficient information or double-checking the information provided. The means become the source of information. Mudde has noted the crucial function of the media in populism: the media gain more independence from

the state and depend on the market for their financial support when they tend to focus on "the more extreme and scandalous aspects of politics".[24] The focus on political scandals promotes exactly the type of "anti-elite sentiment" that populist actors seek to create.[25] Ordinary people can now create their own political blogs and upload films, photos, and cartoons. The emergence of influential blogs such as the Huffington Post in the United States and the use of the Internet as a recruitment tool and fund-raising instrument during the recent U.S. electoral campaign are obviously positive developments in the close relationship between Internet and politics.

Finally, immediacy and the lack of mediation—increasingly common in South Korea—allow verbal violence and witch-hunting. After netizens identify a target, a true online war against the enemy can be waged. The government's Web site may be hacked, TV celebrities can become the embodiment of all evil, and ordinary citizens accused of financial frauds true or imagined can be targeted. Moreover, the fact that at present Internet users can hide behind nicknames and hidden identities leaves these attacks mostly unsanctioned. So, how does this all translate in the Korean context?

Populism Korean Style?

The case of former president Roh Moo-hyun's presidential election in 2002 well illustrates the increasing role played by Internet in Korean politics. Roh Moo-hyun was a charismatic leader who became a leading politician despite being only a high school graduate (in a country where a university degree is a must for supporting ambition) and therefore without any university affiliation, a crucial resource in Korean society and politics. Roh Moo-hyun's ascent to prominence dates to the hearing about the corruption assessments of the Fifth Republic in 1988. His man-of-the-street style (and language) toward the formality of President Chun Doo-hwan and other high officials during the "question time" resonated with the TV audience angry at the authoritarian and corrupt government. He soon became the hearing's superstar.

As a person outside the system (no alumni ties, no party background), Roh Moo-hyun could not rely on many supporters within a party when he became a presidential candidate in 2002. His sources of support lay outside the party system, in the "Rohsamo," in other words, the society of people who love Roh Moo-hyun. Rohsamo was a movement consisting of young progressives who made widespread use of the Internet for social purposes as well as, it turned out, political goals. The Rohsamo netizens helped raise funds to support Roh Moo-hyun, and they organized meetings at their own expense. A bottom-up political campaign orchestrated through chats and online discussions contributed to elevate Roh to the presidency.

A second case illustrative of how online discussions turn into street politics occurred on the occasion of the candlelight vigils held when two junior high school students were accidentally killed by a U.S. military vehicle in June 2002. Popular anger against the U.S. military court's decision (which found the U.S. soldiers not guilty because this was an accident during their military duty) continued for several months. What started as protests by younger citizens (even teenagers) turned into political calls for renegotiating Korea's Status of Forces Agreement with the United States.

More recently, new protests started with expressions of disapproval at President Lee Myung-bak's initiative, soon after his election, to introduce a key reform in Korea's education system. The committee working on the reform announced that by 2010 most high school education would be conducted in English. Promoting English-speaking skills among pupils, their argument went, would help solve the problems of parents spending a lot of money on private-tuition education or even sending their children (along with their mothers) abroad to be educated, an increasingly common situation in Korean families. The new term for this kind of situation is *gireogi appa* (a wild goose daddy), referring to a father who travels abroad to see his family but comes back home alone to work. One effect of the policy would have been that students, teachers, and even parents would have had to spend a lot of money and time to learn English in a short period of time. This, the opponents of the initiative maintained, would reinforce the cleavage between the richer and the poorer segments of Korean society, who would inevitably lose out after the change as they could not afford private tuition.

Although protests over this policy initiative had not yet quieted, a new wave of protests broke out. In April 2008 the government announced its signing of the FTA between South Korea and the United States. While the announcement was heralded as an opportunity for Korean businesses to gain even greater access to the U.S. market, frustration and anger were boiling among the people. One of the issues at stake — and definitely the one that most captured the public's imagination and attention — concerned the implications that beef imports would have for the health of the Korean population. Korean objections were based on the possibility that the beef could have been affected by mad-cow disease.

While one may dispute the benefits or disadvantages associated with the FTA per se, what was striking was that the protests grew out of rumors such as "Korean genes are especially exposed and vulnerable to mad-cow disease," "Americans do not eat American beef; instead they import beef from Australia or New Zealand," "In the United States beef from cattle older than 30 months is not used even for dog or cat food," "Beef for domestic users in the United States is different from the beef exported to Korea," and "In the United States

there are five million Alzheimer's patients; among those, 250,000 to 650,000 patients are assumed to be suffering from mad-cow disease".[26]

Rumors are common in most societies and, of course, are not alien to political affairs. However, these kinds of rumors received considerable attention (one may say support) from the Korean media in, for example, the major current affairs TV program, PD Sucheop [Producer's Note] on 29 April 2008 when it aired a broadcast on mad-cow disease. Later in 2008 the program, which included erroneous reports over the mad-cow issue, was criticized for its strongly antigovernment agenda. During National Assembly hearings on FTA-related incidents in Korea, one member of the Grand National Party accused the TV program of being a main source of rumors.[27]

The PD Sucheop broadcast led to an emotional reaction. Rumors fed other rumors, including that cheap, imported beef from the United States would be used for school lunches for children. Fear for children's health caused a panic that led to the candlelight vigils. Online discussion boards were dominated by this one issue, and Internet bloggers uploaded the PD Sucheop program on their Web sites. The program circulated more and more, gaining an even wider audience receptive of the groundless rumors. This appeared to be especially popular among teenagers, generating many satirical short movies and cartoons among youngsters.[28] A high school student suggested in an internet discussion café that there should be a presidential impeachment; within three days the Web site received a million visitors (and supporters) who signed an online call for presidential impeachment.[29] The vigils were initially peaceful and often rather like a festival, with entertainers singing and dancing. This festival-like atmosphere came to an end when protests became more violent and were met by riot police and a government crackdown.

The real origins of the rumors that stimulated the candle-light vigils (PD Sucheop; or the mainstream media such as Chosun Ilbo, Donga Ilbo, Jungang Ilbo; or even inexperienced government officials) are still disputed. MBC (Munhwa Broadcasting Corporation) and KBS (Korea Broadcasting System) are state-run companies, and many of the high officials within the companies were appointed by the previous governments and held progressive views. Thus, many current-affairs programs seemed to promote an antigovernment political agenda.

The aim of this paper is not to judge the rights or wrongs of the wave of popular protests or whether this was a democratic or even desirable way of expressing dis-satisfaction with the government. Popular protests and uprisings have played crucial roles in bringing authoritarian rules to their end, and they have contributed to democratization. The problem here is that the candlelight vigils showed strong elements of what can be termed digital populism, namely a new type of political behavior marked by the use of the

Internet as both a form of direct political participation and an instrument of social mobilization.

The three dimensions of populist behavior referred to earlier lead to the hypothesis that what happened earlier this year in the streets of Korean cities well conforms to this type of political phenomenon. Protests were articulated along a line that set into opposition ordinary citizens and elites (elites whom, incidentally, the citizens had elected a few months earlier) in a way that construed the two groups as enemies and thus available for all possible attacks. Citizens were portrayed as a homogenous group (us), allegedly representing not only common sense (Who would want to have their children poisoned by unhealthy beef?) but also the so-called true majority. Protests, online and on the streets, represented the way to restore popular sovereignty and will that had been lost to the unrepresentative government institutions. In addition, the populist narrative could count on a powerful instrument: the Internet. Spreading news and recruiting additional protesters were made easy and cheap via the popularity of blogs and chats that reduced significantly the cost of getting out the news of meetings (times and venues).

Thus, the Lee Myung-bak administration plunged into political paralysis. Support for the Lee administration after the presidential election did not last even three months. The representative system of the National Assembly and the politicians within it could not play a mediating role between the state and the citizens; the angry citizens marched to the Blue House to talk with the president directly, and police officers aligned containers on the main road leading to the Blue House as a way to fence off protesters.[30]

Conclusion

A paradox is becoming increasingly common in South Korea: the more widespread the access to information technology, the more opportunities citizens have to participate in politics, make their voices heard, and become politically active. This is certainly positive in cases where e-government links rulers and ruled and where political campaigns recruit and mobilize those who would not otherwise take part, let alone vote. However, the riots associated with candlelight vigils and the acrimony that has accompanied online debates also show a less benign face of this phenomenon.

As I noted elsewhere, the South Korean political party system suffers from a low level of institutionalization.[31] This is problematic because it affects the way in which citizens connect (or not) with political parties as the intermediary organizations between themselves and the government. Parties lose their linkage role with ordinary citizens, opening the space for alternative means for popular participation. The Internet offers such an opportunity for direct, unmediated participation.

The decline in the linkage role of representative organizations and the availability of an immediate and low-cost instrument for voicing unrestricted opinions pose a challenge to representative democracy, as Mudde notes, citing Ralf Dahrendorf when he says, "one's populism is someone else's democracy, and vice versa".[32] As digital technology allows more people to access direct political debates with politicians or even presidential blogs, home pages, and e-government facilities, digital populism seems to bring revolutionary direct participation into politics. As Abts and Rummens note, some scholars have analysed populism "as a means to reveal and even amend the shortcomings and the broken promises of the representative system".[33] Moreover, "[i]t can bring back the disruptive noise of the people and thus prevent the closure of the formal political system".[34] However this very same phenomenon is also referred to as "a pathological form of democracy"[35] or "dangerous threat to democracy"[36], given that direct participation aims to bypass the allegedly flawed representative institutions.

The Internet is playing an increasingly influential role in shaping Korean public and political life, from the campaign that led to the election of Roh Moo-hyun as president in 2002 to the candlelight vigils in the spring of 2008. This of course is not unique to Korea. What is peculiar to Korea is the scale of the phenomenon and the extent to which online political debates have become vicious and abusive, as well as the speed with which online discussions have been taken into the streets. Policy debates are now ongoing as to how to tackle the issue most effectively, but there appears to be no easy way to address the challenge that digital populism poses to a democratic society that is caught between the choices of imposing restrictions to freedom of speech and dealing with the emotional and often abusive behavior of an unchecked minority.

Endnotes

1 This includes several celebrities such as, more recently, Choi Jin-sil (in 2008) and Lee Eun-ju (in 2005), who committed suicide partly as a result of the uncontrolled rumors circulated on the Web over their personal lives. This is now called "cyber terror."

2 See Zaslove, A. 2008. "Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type," *European Review*. Volume 16, Number 3. Pp. 319-36. Abts, K. & S. Rummens. 2007. "Populism versus Democracy." *Political Studies*. Volume 55. Pp. 405-24. Mudde, C. 2004. "The Populist Zeitgeist." *Government and Opposition*. Volume 29. Pp. 541-63. Canovan, M. 2002. "Talking Politics to the People: Populism as the Ideology of Democracy." In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds.) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. Houndmills: Palgrave.

3 Norris, P. 2001. *Digital Divide: Civic Engagement, Information Poverty, and the Internet Worldwide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

4 Candlelight vigils have been a regular feature of Korean politics since 2002. They were initially held to commemorate two students killed by a U.S. army vehicle that year. Online chats formed an important resource from which former president Roh Moo-hyun drew to gather support during his 2002 electoral campaign. Then, when Roh became president

and faced presidential impeachment, netizens moved beyond virtual politics and took to the streets to protest, arguably contributing to the failure of the motion to impeach.

5 The FTA agreement was in fact a legacy from the previous progressive administration.

6 The agreements allowed the import of beef that could come from animals 30 months old; bones and organs would also be imported to South Korea.

7 2MB originally stood for a computer's memory capacity but is now also used as president Lee Myung-bak's nickname. His family name (Lee) in Korean has same sound as 2 (ee) in Korean; MB are his initials. Agora is an Internet discussion café where anyone can register and express personal thoughts and opinions freely. Members of Agora are called as Agorians; this Internet café played a crucial role in organizing offline the candlelight vigils.

8 Abts & Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," 417.

9 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

10 Taggart, P. 2002. *Populism*. Buckingham: Palgrave.

11 Zaslove, "Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type."

12 Abts & Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," 417.

13 Taggart, *Populism*, 2.

14 Taggart, *Populism*, 5.

15 Taggart, *Populism*, 5.

16 Taggart, *Populism*, 1.

17 Taggart, *Populism*, 8.

18 Abts & Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," 408.

19 Canovan, "Talking Politics to the People"; Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

20 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist."

21 Zaslove, "Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type," 321.

22 Canovan, M. 1999. "Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy." *Political Studies*. Volume 47, Number 1. Pp. 2-16. Taggart, *Populism*, cited in Abts & Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," 408.

23 Zaslove, "Here to Stay? Populism as a New Party Type," 322.

24 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 553.

25 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 553.

26 Korea National Strategy Institute, http://knsi.org/~knsiorg/knsi/kor/center/view.php?no=5596&k=2&c=6.

27 Donga Ilbo, 5 September 2008.

28 Sports Hankook, 30 April 2008.

29 Sisa Journal, 15 July 2008.

30 This street blockade gained the popular nickname, "Myung-bak sanseong [walls]" or "Castle MB" (Hankyoreh, 22 June 2008).

31 Young-mi, Kim. 2008. "Intra-Party Politics and Minority Coalition Government in South Korea." *Japanese Journal of Political Science*. Volume 9, Number 3. Pp. 367-89.

32 Mudde, "The Populist Zeitgeist," 543.

33 Bobbio, N. 1987. *The Future of Democracy*. Cambridge: Polity. Hayward, J. 1996. "The Populist Challenge to Elitist Democracy in Europe." In J. Hayward (Ed.) *Elitism, Populism and European Politics*. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Pp. 10-32. Taggart, P. 2002. "Populism and the Pathology of Representative Politics." In Y. Mény & Y. Surel (Eds) *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*. New York: Palgrave. Pp. 62–80. Taggart, P. 2004. "Populism and Representative Politics in Contemporary Europe." *Journal of Political Ideologies*. Volume 9, Number 3. Pp. 269-88. Cited in Abts & Rummens 2007, 405.

34 Arditi, B. 2003. "Populism, or Politics at the Edges of Democracy." *Contemporary Politics*, Volume 9, Number 1. P. 26. Cited in Abts & Rummens 2007, 405-406.

35 Mudde (Quoting Taguieff P. 1995. "Political Science Confronts Populism: From a Conceptual Mirage to a Real Problem." *Telos*, Volume 103. P. 43), "The Populist Zeitgeist," 541.

36 Abts & Rummens, "Populism versus Democracy," 407.

Annotation

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"*The penetration of the Internet in Korean society is* usually *seen as a positive development…*"

It is absolutely exciting to discuss the cultures of the Internet in the Republic of Korea, or South Korea, for two reasons at the very least—it is the country with the highest global average Internet connection speed (at 22.2 Megabytes per Second), and it is a country of legal and technological censorship of digital content (especially of the political kind) and violation of network neutrality to provide preferential treatment to domestic websites. The use of the word 'usually' must be read in this context.

The exploration of 'digital populism' in online political discourse in South Korea that we are about to read is situated in the aftermath of the signing of the Free Trade Agreement between the United States of America and South Korea in 2008. The signing of the Agreement led to physical protests on the streets as well as widespread political uproar and mobilisations through social media networks. These online political acts deserve to be read in reference to the then-prevailing system of regulation of freedom of expression across media channels in the country. Article 21 of the Korean constitution lays down the guarantee of freedom of speech and press of the citizens, while also clarifying that such speech acts may not undermine 'public morals or social ethics.' These constraints on the freedom of expression are further emphasised in the Telecommunications Business Act of 1991, which got revised by the Supreme Court in 2002 so as to expand the meaning of 'harmful content' and the government's ability to redefine the same. Various other laws addressing particular topics, like national security, or population groups, like the youth, also add to the legal instruments available for regulation of online discourse.

In February 2008, after the Presidential election that brought Lee Myung-bak into power, a new body named the Korea Communications Standards Commission (KCSC) was created as part of the media censorship reform. KCSC was given the task to receive complaints regarding the political, moral, and ethical standards of web-based content, and if found unsuitable, to stop access to the content either by ensuring that the content provider deletes the content concerned, or to suspend access to the same for a month at the least. The same government also made it mandatory for websites with greater than ten thousand visitors in a day to ensure that all visitors use their real names and social security numbers to create user accounts with the website. By July 2008, 'cyber-defamation' was approved by the Ministry of Justice as a category of crime for which creators of web-based content that may insult any person or organisation can be imprisoned or fined.

"After netizens identify *a target, a true online war against the enemy can be waged... Moreover, the fact that at present Internet users can* hide *behind nicknames and hidden identities leaves these attacks mostly unsanctioned."*

The topic of 'anonymity' has a complex relationship with democratic politics, and it is also one of the central problematics of our essay. On one hand, anonymity protects a citizen from being identified with particular views or actions (that may be critical of the authorities that be) and then getting ostracised for the same. So anonymity may allow citizens to truly express their opinions. On the other hand, being anonymous means that the person concerned will not have to face any consequences for her/his views or actions. This may lead to easy abuse of the *freedom* (from consequences) that anonymity offers. Further, anonymity may make it impossible to understand from which population or social group a view or action is coming. In other words, anonymity may allow for masquerading – maybe the already-empowered and already-articulate classes will capture the instruments of expression at the cost of those who are less able to use the same. Gabriella Coleman introduces the idea of the 'weapons of the geek' to talk about such usages of anonymity, when actors from the literate and privileged classes use computational skills to undertake politically transgressive acts, hidden under digital masks, so as to test out the "new possibilities and legal limits for digital civil disobedience."

"The problem here is that the candle-light vigils showed strong elements of what can be termed digital populism, namely a new type of political behavior *marked by the use of the Internet as both a form of direct political participation and an instrument of social mobilization."*

Let us sidestep the anatomy of 'digital populism' or 'populism' in general that the essay delineates, and ask if this is really a 'new type of political behaviour'? If so, what exactly is the 'new' thing here? And why is it a matter of concern? In recent public memory in India, a key encounter between populism and the Internet took place during the India Against Corruption movement in 2011-2012. The movement began with a demand that central and state governments institute overseeing ombudsman authorities (called 'Lokpal' in Hindi) that will be able to autonomously investigate and arrest government officials for charges of corruption and abuse of official powers. The movement touched a raw nerve of Indians, gathered a wide cross section of the society in sites and websites of protests, and used Internet-based communication very effectively to organise on-ground activities as well as to dominate cyber-conversations. At times, both the supporters and the critics of the movement agreed that it is 'populist': the former used the word to appreciate how it directly channels a political demand coming across the population and social groups of the country, and the latter used the word to undermine the same demand as

an impractical or unrealisable one, or worse, as a demand of specific social groups that masquerade as a general demand of the whole population. Both these readings of 'populism' also agreed that the movement is anti-institutional; it is interested in political articulations outside institutional frameworks available in the country.

It is on this quality of the Internet, as simultaneously institutionalised and making possible extra- and anti-institutional articulations and exchanges, that one should perhaps focus to think about the 'new' possibilities of anti-institutional politics that it has created. We remember that on one hand, the Internet is a highly technologically-determined space of mediation under surveillance-by-design; but on the other, it is a space of endless possibilities of anonymous activities, connectivity failures, leakages, break-ins, data loss, disc corruption, and administrative and physical limitations of storage of information.

References and Further Readings

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