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South Korea Between 20th Century Political Forces and 21st Century Governance

Kang Man Gil interviewed by Kim Jae Jung

Among painters, there is always someone who is good at conveying perspective. Likewise, if we were to talk about a master of our time, who can provide historical perspective by bringing to light obscure matters and explaining them clearly, it would be Kang Man Gil, President of Sangji University. On November 9, 2004, we met with President Kang in his office and listened to his historical analysis of the present confusing circumstances.

Kang: Our nation was ruled by the Japanese for thirty-five years. When Korea was liberated, Koreans should have been able to build a state on the basis of national sovereignty, but we were divided. In the end, South Korea was able to build a sovereign state, but the two Koreas have fiercely confronted each other in this situation of national partition. The fact that even today we Koreans are unable to create a unified national state is the greatest tragedy of our modern history. However, as we look back on the twentieth century, we find hope in some signs of unification such as the June 15th Communiqué. Signs of peaceful reunification through north-south collaboration make it possible to view the situation as hopeful.

Kim: I asked: how are we to define the modern history of the Korean peninsula and assess the present stage and the remaining historic tasks? He responded that our modern history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the process of "construction of the national sovereign state" and the remaining task for us in the twenty-first century can be summed up in one word, "construction of a unified national state." How then are we to gain perspective on issues somewhat removed from state and nation such as class and people?

The emergence of successive governments by Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun can be seen as the achievement of Korea's post-liberation national, popular, and democratic movements. With the emergence of these two Presidents, democracy in South Korea became increasingly visible.

But, as recent problems such as credit scandals and the expansion of part-time employment reveal, the problems that are directly connected to the lives of ordinary people, "people problems," seem to be worsening. How would you assess this situation?

Kang: The reform process after more than thirty years of military dictatorship has not been completed. The Kim Young Sam administration, the first civilian administration, was limited due to its compromise with previous military governments. So, despite having jailed the past two military presidents, the Kim administration failed to carry out thoroughgoing reform.

After Kim Young Sam, the Kim Dae Jung administration was established, but it confronted two unfortunate problems. The first was, again, related to its genesis, which was that it could not emerge on its own and had to rely on collaboration with the May 16th forces. [On May 16, 1961 General Park Chung Hee seized power in a coup.] The other problem was related to the fact that the Kim Dae Jung government was established in the middle of the "IMF system" that had begun in the last phase of the Kim Young Sam administration as a result of the 1997 financial collapse, and had to face that problem from the start. After all, Kim Dae Jung had no choice but to opt for the Neo-liberal economic system in order to resolve the problems posed by the imposition of the IMF.

The Roh Moo Hyun administration that followed is the first without the taint of collaboration or compromise with previous non-democratic forces. But at the same time, world history is moving toward strengthening Neo-liberalism and weakening national socialism. In light of this world trend, the Roh administration probably could not avoid the problems posed by the current situation.

Of course, the global neo-liberal trend will confront us for a long time, but eventually, it will be stopped. While the fact that the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations are not free from this trend is their misfortune, it is also the misfortune of our nation as a whole. After all, ours is the double-misfortune and double-limitation of being unable to break sharply with our non-democratic past and to overcome neo-liberalism.

Kim: President Kang 's opinion was that behind "people problems" there existed "a strong force of Neo-liberalism." Either way, President Kang clearly distinguished the South Korea prior to the emergence of the Kim Dae Jung administration and subsequent to it. This is the line dividing the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and at the same time, the line dividing "the period of division" and "the period of unification." That is why President Kang defined the current situation reflecting the four legal reforms and social turmoil about them as "contradictions between the old forces of the twentieth century and the new forces of the twenty-first century.

The Neo-liberal Challenge to Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun

Kim: Society is now dealing with the internal contradictions inherent in the reform of the four major laws dealing with national security, freedom of speech, private education, and addressing the legacies of the past. Please comment on how best to deal with the anti-reform forces clamoring for the elimination of these laws.

Kang: I would say that the national security law is most important. This needs to be resolved in conjunction with peaceful reunification. Of particular concern is the provision concerning anti-state organizations. If we were to achieve national unification through war, we could see the *raison d'être* for such a law. However, our nation has learned from the Korean War that we will never achieve unification by means of war. The same applies to German-style absorption of one by the other. The German path looks peaceful, but the absorbing side is forcing its sovereignty and its system on the absorbed side. In the end, this method is not all that different from unification by war. Therefore, we need to opt for the non-war, non-absorption method. But as long as the law defines the other side as an anti-state organization, we will never be able to achieve peaceful unification.

The second important issue is freedom of speech reform. The news media that are subjected to this reform are those anti-democratic media that had served as protector and spokesperson for the previous military government. These media insist that this reform would constitute suppression of freedom of speech, but in fact, it is none other than the reform directed against anti-democratic media. It is obvious that the media that are resisting are precisely those that previously supported and collaborated with the military dictators. We need to strictly distinguish the question of freedom of speech and that of reforming the anti-democratic media.

In my view, the reform of private education should be seen in this way: no matter who the founder may be, the moment anyone or any foundation establishes a school, it is no longer personal or private property, but is public property. Is it not the case that, having donated property for the social good, the founder is publicly respected? Nevertheless, we are encountering founders who regard their schools as private property and say that if their schools are not seen as such, they will 'close them.' I'd like to ask these people what is their purpose in running a school. In some private middle and high schools, up to 80 per cent of operating costs are paid by the government. If the founders in such situations believe that the school is their private property and they can do anything they want, I would say that this is anachronistic. Let me state again: the moment one establishes a school, that school becomes public property.

The problem of coming to terms with the past is serious. When a nation such as ours, that had achieved a certain cultural level, was forcefully occupied by another nation and then was liberated, those who aligned with the occupier must be punished and put aside. Both rightists and leftists participated in the national liberation movement. Rightists such as Kim Ku used to say 'liberation is revolution.' In other words, anyone who opposed national liberation had to be put aside.

But every administration in Korea since independence failed to do so. The rulers cited two reasons for this. One was to prioritize economic development, and the other was the danger of social fragmentation. Because of this procrastination, what was historically right and wrong became blurred, that is, we can say that social justice has not been served. I would say that the Roh administration that I call the twenty-first century government, if belatedly, must complete this task.

History will go as far as it has to go

Kim: President Kang said that the conservatives would not be able to obstruct legal reform, given the overall historical current, and in the long run, they would disappear.

Kang: When we look at the historical current, we always find opposition. And, it is possible that reactionary forces may win once or twice. But their victory is only temporary and the historical current will prevail. That is why there exists this thing called history and that is how we learn and teach.

Kim: President Kang laughed aloud. It was the laughter of a master of history and I could not quite grasp what that laughter meant. I followed up with the question "Why then re-elect Bush?" because so many of us believe that Bush goes against the proper direction of world history.

It is anticipated that Bush's re-election will gravely affect the Korean peninsula and the international order in the region. Some insist that because of this, the Roh government must exercise greater diplomatic independence. What is the prospect for a Korean peninsula that is closely intertwined with the US?

Kang: Again, I'd emphasize the need to see this matter historically. I do not think anyone can guarantee how long the US, which has dominated the world throughout the twentieth century, can maintain its position. For example, Immanuel Wallerstein, the American sociologist, says that US hegemony has been in decline since the Vietnam War and continuing through to Iraq via 9.11. Seen in this way, the hawkish policy of the US, strengthened by Bush's re-election, may actually accelerate the downward spiral. If you are too tough, you break. In the long run, I do not think we need to worry about Bush's re-election. History will solve the matter on its own.

We should also shift our focus toward northeast Asia. Everyone knows that the US and South Korea do not have normal diplomatic relations; they have special relations. Because of this, if Korea were to be reunited at the initiative of the US and Japan, it would be tantamount to unifying our country by war, by invading the north. This would seriously concern China. In this vein, we should look into the reason why China is twisting the history of Koguryo [with Paekche and Silla, one of the three historical kingdoms in the region of northeast China and Korea].

Likewise, Japan fears that it may be isolated in northeast Asia if Korea were to be unified through efforts by China and Russia. This is one reason for Japan's rightism and its intensified dependence on the US. It would be difficult to realize our nation's peaceful reunification by relying on any of these foreign states, whether the US, Russia, Japan, or China. It should, therefore, be obvious to us all that as long as the current special tie between South Korea and the US exists, peaceful reunification will not be realized. For us Koreans, 'self-government' means normal US-ROK relations, not special ones. Only when such a relationship is achieved will we be able to carry out peaceful reunification of our nation.

If North Korea collapses, China will fill the space

Kim: Those who are concerned about the solution to the national question have recently been perplexed by 'the North Korean human rights question.' The US is trying to turn this into a big international issue by passing the 'North Korean Human Rights Bill.' It doesn't look right since the US is attempting to destroy the current North Korean regime. How should we approach this question?

Kang: I would say that we should prioritize the issues of survival and maintaining the current regime over the human rights issue. I think only after these problems are resolved can we discuss the human rights issue. Those concerned about human rights in North Korea must first concern themselves with the survival of the North Koreans and how to maintain the current government there. They should also think about aid programs.

There are moves afoot to connect North Korea's human rights issues with the collapse of the North Korean regime, as can be seen in the 'North Korean Human Rights Bill,' but these moves will only force North Korea to close its doors more tightly. Even if North Korea were to collapse, South Korea would not be able to fill the space.

When President Kim Il Sung passed on, two scenarios emerged with regard to the possibility of the collapse of the North Korean regime. One was that in the event of North Korean collapse, China might dominate the region by the use of military force. The other was that China might advocate the establishment of a pro-Chinese military government. China wants North Korean territory to remain a contained land between the US and Japan. One has to remember what enormous sacrifices China made during the Korean War in order to maintain the position of North Korea. The situation is still the same. Because of this, the North Korean human rights issue should be approached as a humanitarian issue, not as one directed toward the collapse of the regime.

Kim: Finally, President Kang discussed his expectations for the younger generation of Koreans. I did not hear his story as a politically correct talk by an ivory tower professor.

Kang: Some people criticize today's young men and women as corrupt just because they dye their hair, but I don't think that's right. Today's young people do not wage demonstration amidst tear gas like their predecessors. But that does not mean that today's young people are not concerned about our nation's future. Those youths armed with the Internet played an important role in the emergence of the Roh administration and they were the first to voice concern over the unjustifiable death of a female middle school student at the hands of US servicemen. Already, they are grappling with directions of how to look to the future in the twenty-first century.

Kim: President Kang once defined our twentieth century history as the 'history of han [resentment].' I wonder if he said that, because of his concern that we not leave this han to the generations that will follow. He clearly distinguishes the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, deeming the former as having been filled with resistance against national partition and anti-democratic forces and the latter as our path toward peaceful reunification and the development of democracy. When he says, adamantly, "there is no reason why the young people of the twenty-first century should be wearing old clothes," he must have meant that "those young people who live today are the heroes and heroines of the era of peace and reunification."

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