

Analog Government, Digital Citizens

By Kyung Bae Min



When thousands of protestors poured onto the streets of Seoul earlier this year to protest plans to renew imports of US beef, more than a backlash against President Lee Myung-bak was at work. The mass mobilization of discontent owed as much to the Internet's power to organize as it did to outrage at the government, explains South Korean academic Kyung Bae Min.

■ IN 2008, IN THE MIDDLE OF SEOUL, protestors holding candles were assailed by police with water cannons, shields and batons; a female university student's face was smashed by military boots. As these scenes unfolded, many could not help but be reminded of the tragic *Gwangju* uprising of 1980. As the government and the conservative media hinted darkly about "string pullers" behind the scenes, many relived the atmosphere of fear created by past dictatorships.

Asked to choose the greatest achievement of the Lee Myung-bak administration in its first 100 days, netizens sarcastically cited "instigating the people to defend their constitutional rights." A civic group in *Daejeon* "honored" Lee with an award for "promoting democratic civic consciousness." We can discern a sense of composure in ironically bestowing such an award to a president whose approval ratings are plummeting.

The gap between Lee's 1980s-style analog government and the digital citizens of 2008 is huge. First, the Lee administration was more interested in uncovering who paid for the candles than in understanding why people were holding them. Then the police were exposed as Internet illiterates by branding Agora, a section of the popular *Daum* portal that became an organizing tool for protesters, as an online leftist group and investigating its users. Perhaps expecting old-style analog politicians to understand the digital world is expecting too much.

There is another amusing incident illustrating this gap. After several days of candlelight processions being blocked by police water cannons, an interesting blog post appeared. Police positions and movements were marked on Google Earth satellite photos of the *Gwanghwamun* area in downtown Seoul, followed by an explanation of how one could evade the police and march on the Blue House. While the police were communicating via walkie-talkies just as they did 20 years ago, netizens were using satellite imagery.

The candlelight protests, which did not have a single leader but many organizers, may be called "digital protests," enabled as they were by mobile phones, digital cameras and Google Earth. A government armed with water cannons, shields and clubs is facing off against citizens armed with the Internet, mobile phones, and digital cameras.

A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

The analog-digital gap was apparent in discussions about communication. Many perceived a communication problem in the candlelight protests, but the government and the ruling party emphasized the negative aspects of Internet public opinion. To them, the problem was inaccurate information flowing freely over the Internet, combined with vicious insults and groundless rumors. Meanwhile, protesters spoke of the communication problem in terms of the Lee administration ignoring public opinion. While citizens wanted the two-way horizontal communication of the digital age, the government remained stuck in one-way vertical

analog communication. With the two sides failing to communicate even on the communication problem itself, there must be a communication problem indeed.

How can we communicate well? First, we must listen to the other side and we must create conditions for the other side to speak freely. In this sense, the Internet is a perfect space for fulfilling the first condition of communication. Anyone who wishes to speak can express their opinion to the world, and anyone who wishes to listen can easily encounter an array of voices. Of course, this assumes that free expression and an unrestricted flow of information are guaranteed on the Internet.

But the attitudes displayed by the government suggest that the problem is unlikely to improve. "Above all, the Internet should be a space of trust. Otherwise, the force of the Internet could turn out to be venomous rather than beneficial," Lee said in June¹. "We must be wary of 'infodemics' that spread inaccurate information and fan unrest in society."² The president himself revealed that he did not trust Internet public opinion and even treated netizens as victims of a kind of epidemic. The Blue House explained that these were statements of principle, not politically motivated, but few were persuaded. Was the president really making textbook statements with no relation to current events?

Ruling party lawmakers are no different. Rep. Joo Sung-young of the Grand National Party (GNP) excoriated Agora as a "digital trash dump where a few Internet vagrants fan anger and hatred in the guise of a majority."³ Rep. Hong Joon-pyo, the floor leader of the GNP, added, "The Internet is a space where groundless rumors and false stories circulate."⁴

Of course, these criticisms have a context. It is true that Agora users poured out emotional, blunt and abusive language bordering on personal attacks. Groundless rumors did propagate via the Internet, and in several instances netizens did form distorted views without fact-checking. After Seoul's revered *Namdaemun* gate burned down in February, "prophesies" that the nation would soon fall proliferated.

1 Blue House, "Welcoming remarks by President Lee Myung-bak at the OECD ministerial meeting on the future of the internet economy", June 17, 2008. http://english.president.go.kr/pre_activity/speeches/speeches_view.php?uno=228&board_no=E03&search_key=&search_value=&search_cate_code=&cur_page_no=1.

2 Blue House, "Address by President Lee Myung-bak at the Opening of the 18th National Assembly," July 11, 2008. (in Korean) http://www.president.go.kr/kr/president/speech/speech_view.

http://www.doitnow.or.kr/?uno=75&article_no=80&board_no=P04&search_key=&search_value=&search_cate_code=&order_key1=1&order_key2=1&cur_page_no=2&cur_year=2008&cur_month=

3 Joo Sung-young, "Agora and Asura." July 9, 2008. (in Korean) <http://www.doitnow.or.kr/>

4 Hong Joon-pyo, "Speech by the Floor Leader of Negotiation Group at the 276th Session of the National Assembly," July 14, 2008. (in Korean) <http://www.jphong21.co.kr/>.

Groundless rumors, like one accusing Lee of ceding the Dokdo islets to Japan or planning to restrict Internet usage, lingered. In June, a false story that the police had covered up the death of a female university student protester by whisking away the corpse spread like wildfire. These are negative side effects of Korea's Internet culture that must be resolved.

The problem is that government measures introduced under the guise of dealing with these issues are in fact tactics designed to block free political expression and restrict information. As soon as the National Assembly went into session, bills to regulate the Internet flooded the floor. One would require real names on all Internet forums. There is also talk of restricting the media functions of portals and forcibly deleting comments. There is nothing standing in the way of a ruling party with a considerable majority in parliament, and even government prosecutors are creating an atmosphere of fear by intimidating netizens.

After failing to listen to Internet public opinion on the issue of US beef imports and other grievances, now the government is trying to limit free expression. President Lee is correct that the power of the Internet must be built on trust, but if he believes trust can be built through regulation, the problems can only worsen. This is fundamentally why people are angry. Unilateral policies and the arrogance of hiding behind police shields with plugged ears instead of listening to the people are causing the government's approval ratings to plummet. The US beef controversy was merely the trigger. In this sense, those pulling the strings behind the protests were none other than the Lee administration itself.

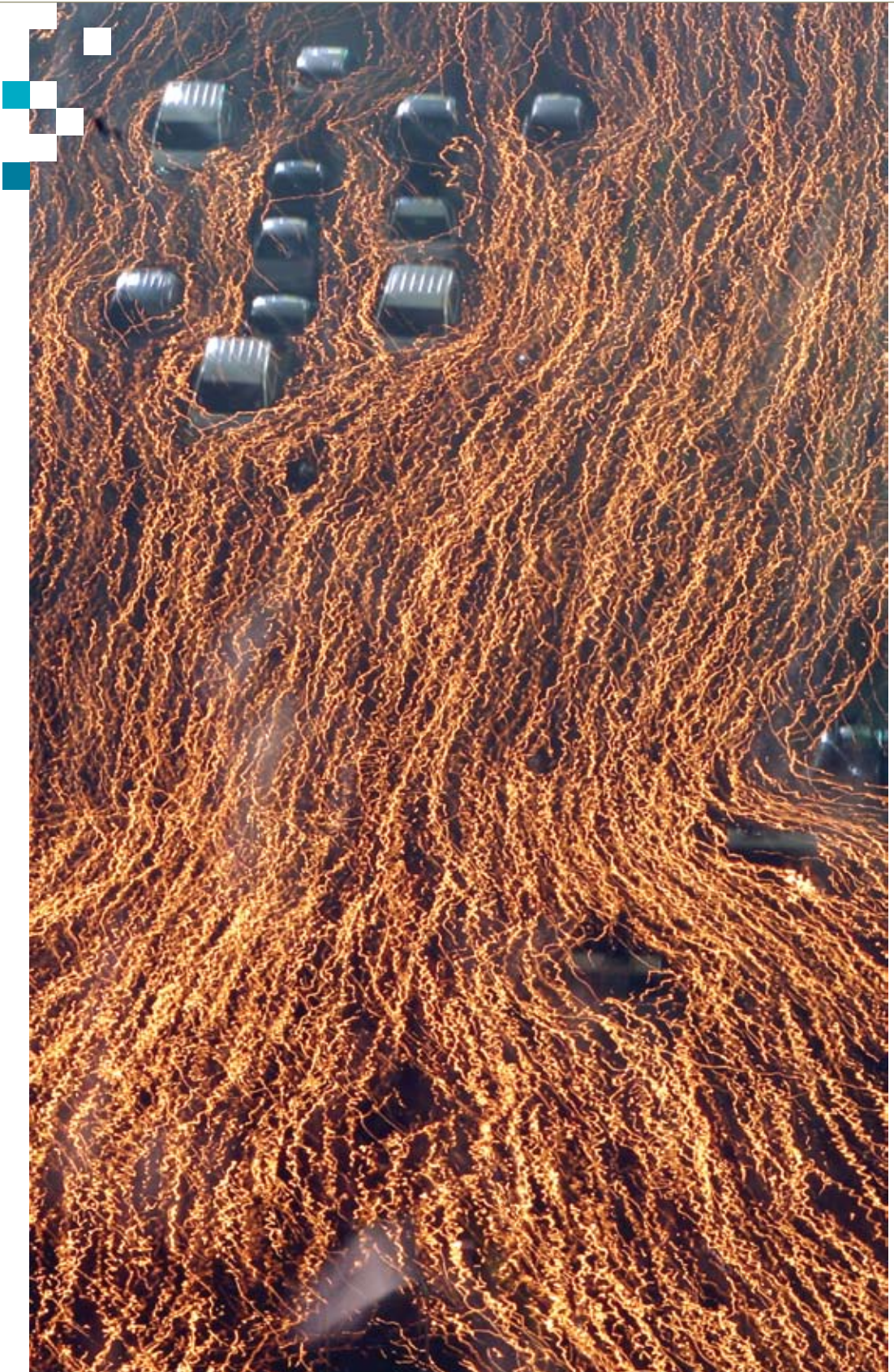
TEENS TAKE THE STREETS

That those who first lit the fuse of the candlelight protests were teenagers is highly relevant. What is driving them into the streets? The most direct

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reason was the perceived danger of contracting mad cow disease through school lunches, but that was not the only reason. Unhappiness over English immersion education, extra classes, ranked classes and other education initiatives of the Lee administration affecting middle and high school students reached a critical point and finally exploded over the US beef controversy. Furthermore, these teens belong to a generation that could not yet vote. They were free from the responsibility of having voted for this administration, so they could criticize freely and oppose unhindered. Today's teens are also the children of the "386 generation" that led Korea's democracy movement in the 1980s; they are carrying on the legacy of their parents' civic consciousness and critical awareness.

Some say these young people are "children ignorant of the world," but those who talk this way are the truly ignorant ones. Today's teens, more than any other generation, absorb information quickly via the Internet and have formed broad online networks. This is why adults were confounded by the revolt of teens armed with digitalism and a new outlook symbolized by candles. Others describe these teens as children befuddled and manipulated by rumors, but those who see the protests in this manner fail to see the autonomy and independence of digital age youths. The paradigm of governance has long passed from grand discourse on class



Above Protesters marching down *Taepyeongno*, the central street in downtown Seoul, on June 6 toward *Namdaemun Gate*, the 2nd day of a 72-hour marathon candlelight demonstration opposing US beef imports. Photo: Yonhap News Agency

and *minjok* (racial identity) to everyday politics. In this context, it is only natural that teens raise their voices on the issue of food safety, which is directly related to their everyday lives.

We must not lose sight of another important reason for Korean teens' participation in society: their shared historical experience. These teens spent their childhood and adolescence in the period when former democracy activists held power, a period dubbed the "lost 10 years" by the current rightist government and ruling party. While older generations worry that the Lee administration is returning to the authoritarian era, these teens do not remember the authoritarian era. For them, the current government ramming through policies like a bulldozer is something unheard of, absurd and bewildering. Furthermore, in their experience, the presidency is not a position of infallibility. They have witnessed former presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun being reviled and mocked by the media and the public to the point of excessiveness. For them, getting investigated by the police for not toeing the government line or criticizing the president is bizarre. The current situation goes against everything they know.

GATHERING AT THE DIGITAL SQUARE

The source of the candlelight protests was the Agora forum on the portal site *Daum*. It was at Agora where a high school student using the moniker "Andante" started a petition to impeach President Lee. It was also at Agora where the fuse was lit for the first candlelight protest. Talk of a march on the Blue House was set in motion on Agora, which refers to the square where ancient Greeks first practiced direct democracy.

Since ancient times, the square was a familiar space for Koreans. Traditional entertainments took place in the square, and the heart of this culture was participation, communication and



freedom. In this sense, the square need not necessarily be a wide-open space. A market, a creek where village women chat while washing clothes or the shade of a tree where old men play chess could all be considered squares in a broad sense.

This public space turned into a dirty word in Korea's modern political history. The participation, communication and freedom of a square were associated with impure elements seeking to overthrow the system. The door to the square was firmly locked through assembly and traffic laws. The square was thenceforth only occasionally opened as a stage for parading soldiers or triumphant Olympic athletes. Citizens were pushed to the sidelines where they were expected to dutifully wave Korean flags and applaud. There was no room for participation, communication and freedom and the square became a forbidden zone.

The Internet opened a new space. Citizens discovered an alternative square. Well-developed Internet forums, not easily found in other countries, became the infrastructure of the online square. Each day, countless people logged on and raised their voices. Stories ranging from sensitive political issues to tidbits about celebrities, and appeals to correct a wrong flooded the Internet



Left Police using water canons on demonstrators near Seoul City Hall at a candlelight rally protesting US beef imports in the early morning of June 26.

Below A girl holding candlelights with her father at a rally protesting US beef imports in downtown Chuncheon on the evening of June 10. Photos: Yonhap News Agency



forums. Sometimes netizens engaged in heated debates, and sometimes those with similar interests formed online communities. The online square evolved into a public arena for free political expression as the Net slowly developed a culture of participation.

2002 was a monumental year for this culture. The Red Devils of the World Cup, the Roo Moo-hyun fan club during the presidential election, grew online. Also, candlelight protests over an incident involving a US military vehicle packed downtown with countless people who had connected via the Internet. The restoration of the square that had begun on the Internet expanded offline. As candles were lit again in 2008, a clash finally took place between digital citizens returning to the square and an analog government determined to keep them out.

TYPES OF DIGITAL CIVIC ACTIVISTS

This is the third time that large-scale candlelight protests have broken out in Korea. But the use of digital media in 2008 has evolved remarkably compared to the 2002 protests or the 2004 protests over attempts to impeach President Roh. In the past, digital media use was limited to disseminating protest schedules, posting live netcasts or uploading parodies of

current events. As digital media have become more multi-faceted and sophisticated, citizens can also be classified depending on what digital media they use and how they do so.

The first type is “participant.” They are the ones holding candles and taking part in street processions. They communicate with other participants through text messages and relay information to their friends and family to encourage their participation.

The second type is “recorder.” They record vivid footage of the protests with cameras and camcorders for uploading on the Internet. They carry notebook computers equipped with Webcams and broadcast live on the Web site Afreeca. In street processions, they record the police confronting them. As the police take photos of the participants for evidence, they take photos of the police for evidence. When the police are about to assault a citizen, they quickly snap photos. One of the reasons why malicious reporting on the candlelight protests by the conservative media has not worked is due to these citizen journalists.

The third type is “analyst.” They analyze photos and videos uploaded by the recorders to identify the police committing acts of violence. They also compose lists of items that should be brought to the protests or explain how to respond when de-

tained by police. The blogger who uploaded the Google Earth satellite photos mentioned above would be classified as an “analyst.”

The fourth type is “disseminator.” They share their experiences on blogs or Internet forums. When a new piece of information emerges, they diligently disseminate it online. Engaging in heated debates with those who disagree with them on the US beef controversy or the candlelight protests is also their lot. They are the “big mice” who set the agenda and steer public opinion.

Of course, the line between these types can be blurred. Sometimes participants whip out their cameras and become recorders, and then return home to become analysts or disseminators. Each individual, according to the situation, decides independently and acts flexibly to create an ever greater current.

A sentence scrawled on a police bus illustrates the point: “Be careful when you hit us. You could become an Internet star!” Cameras flashing at moments of brutality embarrass the police. One police chief warned his subordinates not to assault women or the elderly in front of the cameras, but the warning itself was videotaped and uploaded on the Internet. (Of course, netizens wondered whether the police chief believed it was okay to assault women or the elderly when no cameras were present.) The protesters themselves are playing the role of the media. The candlelight protests are opening an age of street journalism by citizen reporters.

REPORTERS OF THE STREET

It is said that street journalism got started when someone took photos of the 2005 London subway terrorist attack with a mobile phone camera and uploaded them on the Internet. But street journalism had already demonstrated its power in Korea in the 2003 *Daegu* subway arson incident. A mobile phone photo taken immediately before the disaster was splashed on the front pages of all the major dailies the next day. The photo showed riders covering their mouths with handkerchiefs as white smoke crept into the subway car, a scene that could not have been captured by the journalists arriving after the fact.

Street journalism is evolving through the candlelight protests. First, specialists are emerging. Where street journalism in the past relied on circumstance, now citizens are taking the initiative. Some even wear citizen-reporter armbands and form digital camera clubs that roam the protests.

Second, street journalism is an alternative media. The biased reporting of the conservative media has not worked as news provided by countless street journalists dominated the coverage of the mainstream media in quantity. Street journalists conveyed vivid scenes and voices from the protests. The mainstream media was busy catching up. In-depth reporting is also happening online, and street journalists are doing such things as estimating the number of protesters by analyzing aerial photos with pixel-calculating software. Citizens act, other citizens report their actions, and still others steer public opinion. This evolution is shaking up the media environment.

CIVIC PARTICIPATION GOES DIGITAL

A distinguishing feature of the latest candlelight protests is the reflection of Internet culture in offline protests. The most obvious example is the combination of the basic principles of Web 2.0 and civic participation. *Gwanghwamun* Plaza, dotted with candles, was reminiscent of the Web as a platform—an open space where anyone can come and go and use the site as they please. Each day, diverse people made speeches, and spontaneous themes were continuously generated.

There were other features of the Web 2.0 world. The protests lacked a single leadership, instead the principle of collective intelligence was displayed. The tireless and sustained participation could be seen as a manifestation of the “Long Tail” phenomenon behind the philosophy of Web 2.0, expressed as participation, freedom, openness and sharing — all key democratic values. The current digital environment is evolving in a way advantageous to the expansion of democratic values.

Even the street processions were reminiscent of the hyperlink flow of the Internet. When blocked by the police, the protesters took detours. When blocked again, they changed direc-

5 *Chosun Ilbo*, "Lee Mun-yol, Widaehana Kkeumjjikhan Digital Populism" [Lee Mun-yol, Great but Freightning Digital Populism], June 12, 2008.

6 *Donga Ilbo*, "Lee Mun-yol, Chotbul Jangnan Neomu Oraehae... Uibyeong Undong Ireonaya" [Lee Mun-yol, Played with Candles for Too Long...There Should Be a Volunteer Movement Against It], June 18, 2008.

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tions again. When blocked a third time, they split up only to meet up again. The protesters' flexible paths moved in non-linear fashion through links. These unpredictable movements confounded police accustomed to linear processions. The impregnable wall of *Gwanghwamun* that had frustrated even the veteran protesters of the past was rendered impotent by the hyper-link flow of amateur protesters.

Continuously seeking two-way communication, even during the protests, was another reflection of the Internet style. Departing from the traditional practice of unilaterally shouting slogans through megaphones, the protesters sought to communicate with the police. To a police chief who warned of imminent action, they shouted, "Sing!" Facing police trucks wielding water cannons, they demanded "towels" and "warm water." Some emerged as negotiators and mediators in tense situations. Others waved to the police on their way home and hollered, "See you tomorrow!" The protesters never lost their desire for two-way communication.

This combination of protest and play is another phenomenon derived from Internet culture. In the front, a police bus is being pulled by ropes, but in the rear, an impromptu street

performance and a merry candlelight festival are unfolding. Lovers enjoy a candlelight date, while old friends hold a candlelight reunion. When the situation gets dangerous, the protesters' provocative humor shines. They stick "illegal parking" stickers on police buses barricading the streets. When surrounded, they willingly board police buses to snap commemorative photos and take the "chicken coop tour." When told that street processions violate traffic laws, they hold short "traffic light protests" on the crosswalk. Departing from the solemnity of protests in the 1980s, a new protest culture of fun, delight and satisfaction is being created.

The entire paradigm of civic participation is undergoing a big shift. The traditional mode of protest may be compared to a streetlight. As an immobile streetlight keeps the darkness at bay throughout the night, so civic groups and other activist organizations took the lead in past civic actions.

In contrast, the mode of civic participation traversing *Gwanghwamun* and the Internet now may be compared to Christmas lights. Each light is small and faint, and blinks unstably. But each light forms a network with others and works together to brightly decorate a Christmas tree. This is the power of online networks - small, blinking lights exchange information, share opinions and gather strength to take action. In this sense, the countless candles dotting the offline square are an analog metaphor for a new digital civic participation.

THE CRISIS OF REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY

The candlelight protests that animated Korean society for two months posed fundamental questions about representative democracy. Novelist and conservative pundit Lee Mun-yol characterized them as "digital populism," both "great" and "frightening."⁵ Lee marveled at the popular feeling emanating from the candlelight protests while at the same time expressing wariness over the spectacular rise of mass politics. A few days later, Lee commented again, "If you play with fire too long, you will get burned. I think they are playing with candles too long."⁶

Lee's characterization of the candlelight protests as "digital populism" is incorrect. Lee failed to understand the basic concept of populism, which is a form of mass opportunism or popular opportunism, whereby a group retains power by mobilizing the masses. For populism to exist, there must be a group in power that mobilizes the masses. Therefore, to label mass participation in street politics as populism is inappropriate.

While citizens wanted the two-way horizontal communication of the digital age, the government remained stuck in one-way vertical analog communication.



Interestingly, a similar view was also articulated on the left. A few days after Lee's comment, Professor Choi Jang-jip of Korea University, a liberal scholar, said. "The candlelight protests arose because democratic institutions, such as elections, parties, representation and accountability, failed after democratization. Basically, democracy is representative democracy, and social movements cannot replace representative democracy forever."⁷

Choi concluded that a revitalization of party politics rather than an expansion of direct democracy was what Korean democracy needed.

It is ironic that conservative pundit Lee's "frightening digital populism" and liberal scholar Choi's "defense of party politics" arrived at the same conclusion about the candlelight protests. Both observers were wary of direct political participation by the masses. Perhaps the possibility of direct democracy based on the Internet and a new participatory culture created by netizens struck these two senior commentators as strange and confusing.

Choi's view perplexed younger scholars who had seized upon the possibilities of direct democracy. Diverse reactions poured out. One claimed

7 *Ohmynews*, "Minjuui neun Daeuije, Jeongkwon Toejin Undong eun Jalmot" [Democracy is Representative System, Demanding Resignation of the President is Wrong], June 20, 2008. http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/view/at_pg.aspx?CNTN_CD=A0000931241

8 *Ohmynews*, "Choi Jang-jip 'Daeui Minjuuiron' eun Gyogwaseojeok Gangbak" [Choi Jang-jip's 'Representative Democracy Theory' is a textbook-like obsession], July 2, 2008. http://www.ohmynews.com/NWS_Web/View/at_pg.aspx?NTN_CD=A0000935832&PAGE_CD=N0000&BLCK_NO=3&CMPT_CD=M0001&NEW_GB=



Left A huge crowd of protesters with candlelights illuminate the Kwanghwamun area of downtown Seoul at a rally commemorating the "June 10th Resistance in 1987," on the evening of June 10. Photo: Yonhap News Agency

that "insisting on party politics is no different from old-style conservatism." Another asserted that "the problems caused by flawed party politics should be resolved through party politics." Yet another said, "Choi has reduced politics to elections and parties." Still another insisted that "instead of constructing theory in the square, Choi is constructing the square from theory."⁸

But this is not a debate that should be seen as a zero-sum game. In reality, Internet direct democracy bolsters representative democracy. The crisis of representative democracy is not due to the expansion of Internet democracy; existing

parties have failed to grasp the shifting paradigm of digital civic participation. The decisive factor behind the candlelight protests was the failure of the representative system to incorporate citizens' demands into the political process.

Even in direct digital democracy, citizens do not flood the streets right away. Their participation begins by making their voices heard in the political sphere via the Internet. The homepages of the Blue House, government agencies, parties and lawmakers could act as online mediators between digital civic participation and representative democracy. If these online mediators function smoothly, direct democracy and representative democracy could have a synergy effect. The latter could be improved by incorporating elements of the former.

Unfortunately, this has not been the case so far. Citizens had to create a public space of their own on *Daum's* Agora because there was no direct online communication with the government. The government must reflect on its failure to adapt to a rapidly changing environment and listen to citizens' demands. It has remained stuck in the old paradigm and become an object of suspicion and ridicule in the process. Existing political parties have also failed to reflect the new paradigm of digital civic participation. Analog politicians must realize that the Internet offers an opportunity for a breakthrough to improve Korea's stagnant political culture. The candles lighting up *Gwanghwamun* Plaza are carrying the demand that representative democracy evolve into a new form suitable to the Internet age.

Professor Kyung Bae Min teaches at the Department of NGO Studies of Kyung Hee Cyber University in Seoul, Korea, and is Director of the Cyber Culture Research Institute. His publications in Korean on new media and civil society include *Yeongsang Hakseup Hyeongmyeong [Image Learning Revolution]* (Seoul: Yemun, 2005) and *Saibeo Speis ui Sahoe Undong [Social Movements of Cyber Space]* (Seoul: Korean Studies Information Co., 2006).