Historical Characteristics of Korea’s Social Democracy

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Introduction

Socialism is an ideology that was formed and organized in the process of the political movement of modern western Europe. For its part, social democracy, founded in the late 19th century, carried the same meaning as socialism in that it criticized the structural discrepancy within capitalism. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution and the establishment of the Comintern, the Communist International, in 1919, social democracy began to be diverged from Marxism-Leninism, or communism.

As a result of its individual ideological origin and hue within each country, there are many interpretations of social democracy. However, there are a few essential values that are consistently pursued: democracy and socialism as well as political freedom and socio-economic equality. Seen in this light, social democracy can be found not only in the West as there exist different versions in various countries throughout the globe.

While Korea began to participate in exchanges with countries in which social democracy was practiced since 1917, the relationship did not take root. Therefore, it is easy to see that Korea’s variety of social democracy1 is more of a philosophy and ideology created

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during the process of our own historical development, rather than something that was formed as a result of any relationship with the West. Moreover, Korea’s social democracy emerged as a movement based on practicality rather than as a result of any theoretical debate or strife. And thus, Korea’s social democracy is a practical ideology boasting Korean characteristics, which nevertheless in many ways approaches the variety of social democracy found in the West.

During the Japanese colonial era, the national independence movement was composed of three camps, a right wing pursuing bourgeois democracy, a left wing pushing for socialism, and a centrist camp whose objective was the emergence of a social democracy. From the onset, these three camps had differing theories of state construction based on their own ideological leanings. However, as the national unification movement expanded and developed, all three camps in the independence movement found their way toward social democracy.

Following liberation, given the great influence of the U.S. and the Soviet Union on the Korean peninsula, the left and right wings, rather than continuing to pursue the national unification movement, suddenly found themselves facing off and spouting their own ideologically laced theories. Under this new political reality, the camp that had pursued independence from a social democracy approach suddenly found itself the middle ground between the two extremes. Its practical approach to establishing an independent unified state, a monumental task after liberation, was exemplified by its belief that given the prevailing domestic and international situation, a centrist and united regime would be the best possible solution. As such, there existed at the time a high probability that an approach to state construction based on social democracy would be selected as the new national system.

Following the failure to establish a unified state, two separate countries were created having different ideologies and systems.
The two countries—North and South Korea—did not allow any political activity that might be deemed as being contrary to their own ideologies. However, in South Korea, where there was somewhat more room for political debate, there was much discussion of establishing a so-called progressive party and encouraging it to conduct its activities. Although it is hard to define exactly the various ideologies that this progressive party pursued, there is no arguing that it exhibited social democratic characteristics.

This paper intends to study the process of how Korea’s social democracy and its proponents came together, and to clarify the historical characteristics of Korea’s social democracy by analyzing its role and function during the Japanese colonial era, after liberation, and on the divided Korean peninsula.

**National Independence Movement During the Japanese Colonial Era and Social Democracy**

The main task of Koreans at the end of the 19th century was the establishment of a modern nation state. However, the nationalist movement around this period failed to establish a nation state, and thus the Korean peninsula was colonized by Japan. Around the time of the Japanese ‘annexation’ of Korea in 1910, Korea’s ideological world was searching for ways to overcome social evolution theory that had been used as a controlling theory to justify the imperialist state. In order to solve this, various modern social ideologies such as liberalism, nationalism, socialism and anarchism were applied to the national independence movement.²

Prior to the March First Movement and even in its aftermath, Korea’s nationalist movement in China was interested in the kind of social democracy practiced in the West. For example, in autumn of 1917, Shin, Kyu-sik(申圭植) and Cho, So-ang(趙素昻) formed the Chosŏn Socialist Party(朝鮮社會黨) and sent a telegram to the
Socialist Party’s international conference being held in Stockholm, Sweden (by Western social democrats). In fact, Cho, So-ang participated in the Socialist Party’s international conference held in Lucerne, Switzerland in August 1919. Unfortunately, the relationship with Western social democracies did not take root, which led to the decline of the Chosŏn Socialist Party, the first social democratic party in Korean history.

Despite the exchange of concepts related to social democracy between Korea and the Western world, rather than being a simple acceptance of the social democracy practiced in the West, Korea’s social democracy was formed as a result of the ideological development of the national independence movement. Specifically, there is a need to pay proper attention to the period during which the social democratic direction or ideology first took root within the national independence movement. In other words, Korea’s social democracy started to be formed during the period when nationalists began to study the ideological basis for the national independence movement and for the national unification movement based on the unified front.

The first ideology characterized by social democracy was the Sam Kyun theory(三均主義), put forward by Cho, So-ang in 1927 or 1928. This Sam Kyun ideology was composed of dual frames, which included the striking of a balance between the individual, nation and state, and also one between politics, economy and education. The equal society that was intended to be brought about in the Sam Kyun theory involved the achievement of political equality, by guaranteeing individual rights and freedom based on democratic principles, in the political sphere. In the economic sphere, the equality of living standards was to be realized through a planned economy, reasonable distribution of wealth, and the assurance of a proper welfare system for workers, based on the nationalization of land and large-sized factories. In the social sphere, the theory intended to prepare the ground for social
equality by enforcing a compulsory education system at government expense and guaranteeing equal opportunity for education. Though this Sam Kyun theory is viewed as a form of modified capitalism, several social democratic characteristics can be found.

The Righteous Brotherhood (義烈團) organized by Kim, Won-bong (金元鳳) and his followers began to take on the characteristics of a national independence party with socialist characteristics from 1927 onwards. In October of the next year, the group announced their general principles containing 20 articles, which included the establishment of a democratic state, the construction of an economic structure based on parity, the enforcement of a local self-governing system, the confiscation of landowners’ land, the guarantee of workers and farmers right to form unions and the nationalization of large-scale factories. While it is difficult to define the Righteous Brotherhood during this period as a social democratic group, their ideology, as reflected in their general principles, can be said to be closer to social democracy.³

In Manchuria, social democratic ideology also began to appear from the mid-1920s onwards. The Da Mool party, the Revolutionary Party of Koryŏ (高麗革命黨) and the Korean Revolutionary Party (朝鮮革命黨) in which core members of the Jōngŭibu (正義府) and the Kukminbu (國民府) participated in, also pursued so-called social nationalism. While the social nationalist camp sought non-capitalist development, it was opposed to both the dictatorship of the proletariat and to absolute social ownership. In addition, it was opposed to the extortion of the bourgeois class, yet still was opposed to the capitalist system. Although the social hue and degree of social nationalism differed depending on the period and particular group, social nationalism as a whole can be seen as an ideology based on social democracy.⁴

Likewise, Korea’s social democracy was not born out of ideological debate or strife, but was rather a practical political
ideology generated from the national independence movement. However, Korea’s particular brand of social democracy does not differ from the Western variety in that it pursues both democracy and socialism and is as such, along with capitalism and communism, one of the main political ideologies that have influenced modern and contemporary history.

On the other hand, after the failure to unify the nationalist movement due to the stalemate over the establishment of a leadership group, the nationalist camp in China broke down into various independence parties based on ideology and particular factions. These nationalist parties are distinguished from previous groups due to the fact that they possessed their own manifestos that outlined their ideas for the nation state to be brought about, as well as calls to resist Japanese aggression. Nonetheless, the main task of all the actors within the independence movement was the achievement of Chosŏn’s independence and of national liberation, and as such their first task was the achievement of a unified front. Therefore, the leading ideology was the most critical issue to the leaders of the nationalist movement in constructing a nation state and overcoming the ideological contradictions of the left and right wings.

During this period, the theory of Sam Kyun emerged as a leading ideology that encompassed most of these demands. Therefore, the theory of Sam Kyun was not only the ideological basis for right-wing nationalist parties such as the Korea Independence Party(韓國獨立黨) and the Korea Nationalist Party (韓國國民黨), but also influenced the party decisions of the National Revolutionary Party, a unified front party. Additionally, the theory of Sam Kyun is historically significant in that it was both the essential theory behind the Nation State Construction Theory established by the right wing during the struggle for independence, and was also selected as a fundamental theory to bring about the unification of the various camps seeking independence.
Although the number of those who joined the independence movement increased in the 1920s, it is hard to categorize their activities as being highly organized. It is only during the 1930s that a centrist camp pursuing social democracy was finally created. The National Revolutionary Party, which first appeared in July 1935, was a party promoting a unified front composed of individuals from all across the ideological spectrum. However, the unified front of the National Revolutionary Party weakened in the aftermath of the desertion of right wing actors such as the Korea Independence Party and left wingers such as Choi, Chang-ik and his followers. While the National Revolutionary Party was composed mainly of Righteous Brotherhood members during this period, it was actually led by centrists such as Kim, Won-bong.

The ideology of the National Revolutionary Party was composed of the following elements. First, the party had a consistent plan for the establishment of a democratic republic based on its principles, and for the ‘democratic administration of the country’ as the type of government to be brought about. Although one of its original clauses, ‘the enforcement of a planned economy’ was removed, it still maintained socialist inspired principles such as the nationalization of land and large-scaled factories, along with the implementation of an educational system fully paid for by the government and a rigid social security system. Moreover, the National Revolutionary Party claimed that it did not pursue a socialist state nor an English or American-style state in which the property-oriented class was prevalent, but rather the ‘most modernized and progressive capitalist democratic state’ in which the interests of the workers, farmers and proletariat would be protected. When this is taken into account, it becomes clear that one of the overall goals of the National Revolutionary Party was the pursuit of social democracy.5

In Korea, the existence of the Korean Communist Party established in 1925 made it difficult for social democracy to exist.
As such, it was not until 1930 when the Korean Communist Party was disbanded that social democracy became the most popular ideology. The leading intellectuals who advocated social democracy critically accepted Marxism, but unlike left-wing socialists, also believed in the need to maintain a united national front. Although they did not actively promote organized activities, social democrats such as Yeo, Un-hyeong (呂運亨) and Bae, Sung-ryong (裵成龍) were at the forefront of the initial efforts to bring about a unified front.6

In August of 1944, Yeo, Un-hyeong and some of his associates inspected the state of the unified front across the nation, which led to a more rigidly organized movement known as the Korean Independence League, which maintained the momentum of the social democrats and even increased their renown across Korea. The Korean Independence League had as its primary goal the acceleration of the destruction of the Japanese colonial regime and the preparation for the advent of an independent Korean regime. However, from the onset one of Yeo’s goals was the development of the Korean Independence League into an innovative political party. 7 He announced after liberation, that the Korean Independence League “aims to give land to farmers and nationalize major factories, transportation and media organizations, and have the state operate the major commercial industries,”8 all of which indicates the social democratic leanings of the Korean Independence League.

During the Japanese era, the theory of state construction as designed by the main actors in the independence movement exhibited differences based on their particular ideologies and policies. However, as the unified front movement developed, each faction making up the independence movement, despite their different ideological backgrounds, managed to find common ground. As such, they agreed to establish a democratic republic based on a democratic system in the political sphere, while
supporting the emergence of a unified front composed of all the various factions within the independence movement. In addition, they actively supported the emergence of a social system that included the taking of such steps as the nationalization of land and large-scale factories, and the enforcement of a fully government funded educational system as a socio-economic system.

During the era of the unified front, all the main actors within the independence movement agreed on the need to establish a nation state after liberation that would be based on a socio-economic system that included the following conditions: 1) The inclusion of every citizen within the new government with the exception of the pro-Japanese camp and those deemed traitors to the nation; 2) The need to look after the rights of those segments of society that had suffered the most under Japanese colonial rule; 3) The finding of common ground between all the main actors within the independence movement so as to bring about an independent nation state; and 4) The recognition of the world trend toward pursuing the liberation of all human beings.

**Theory of the Construction of a Social Democratic State after Liberation**

While Korea’s liberation in August 1945 occurred officially as a result of the Allied victory over Japan to end World War II, there is no denying that the efforts of the independence movement during the Colonial era also played a part in bringing this about. The Cold War structure that emerged from the ashes of World War II led to the division of the Korean peninsula by the U.S. and the Soviet Union; a development that prevented the establishment of an independent unified national state. As a result, following liberation, demands arose among the main political actors to bring about an even more unified front.
Within their individual zones of control the U.S. and the Soviet Union went about assuring that the main political forces would be those most sympathetic to their cause, a logic that was later applied when the time came to establish governments within the two zones. As antagonism between the U.S. and the Soviet Union worsened, the establishment of a unified national state began to look less and less likely. However, in reality liberation provided Koreans with an opportunity to establish a unified national state while minimizing the degree of foreign control.

Korea, after liberation, was a place in which those forces that had not participated in the independence movement suddenly found themselves in power, and in which a variety of political factions with different ideologies and policies remained as divided as ever. While this political reality arose partly from the fact that liberation was realized without there having been enough time to form a sound unified front, the overall reason for this stems from the fact that the U.S. and the Soviet Union, with their antagonistic systems, divided and took control of the Korean peninsula. Additionally, the policies of the U.S. and the Soviet Union, along with the growing strength of the traitors to the nation further hastened the deepening of the ideological divide.

While the left and right wings were engaged in growingly open conflict, the centrist camp launched a movement to construct a unified state based on the theory of the construction of a social democratic state. The major parties within the centrist camp included the People’s Party and Korean Worker’s Party (朝鮮人民黨-勤勞人民黨) led by Yeo, Un-hyeong, the National Revolutionary Party & Korean People’s Republic Party (朝鮮人民共和黨) led by Kim, Won-bong and the National Independence League (民族自主聯盟) led by Kim, Kyu-sik (金奎植). The Socialist Party (社會黨) led by Cho, So-ang, which will be mentioned later, is also included as one of the centrist parties.
Let us know take a look at the centrist camp’s theory of state construction and their ideological goals: for his part, Yeo, Un-hyeong, one of the leaders of the centrist camp, began to acquire his social democratic orientation during the independence movement. Such that, after liberation, he supported the creation of a party led by workers and farmers with the participation of leading intellectuals, the urban elite and morally endowed capitalists, but eventually further expanded it to involve a wide range of social classes in order to form a truly representative party. Although Yeo called himself a ‘progressive democrat’, his general ideology was more akin to social democracy.

The People’s Party led by Yeo emphasized the fact that it supported the creation of an inclusive party that would represent all segments of society and announced as on of its principles its “contribution to the construction of a democratic state through the gathering of the combined efforts of all the people of Chosŏn”, its “contribution to the complete liberation of all people by establishing a planned economic system”. The party also promoted its intent to “reorganize the land and establish a cultivation system favorable to farmers” “nationalize or assure the public-management of major enterprises while liberating small-medium enterprises from government control”, its willingness to “enforce various forms of social security”, and “enforce compulsory education and education for gifted children(秀才敎育) at government expense”. This particular approach to state construction policy was shared by the Social Labor Party(社會勞動黨) and the Korean Worker’s Party, which was the successor to the People’s Party. In addition, the Social Labor Party differentiated itself from the Korean Communist Party(朝鮮共産黨) and the South Korean Worker’s Party (南朝鮮勞動黨) led by Park, Hun-young(朴憲永) by actively promoting social democratic characteristics in its platform.
The National Revolutionary Party for its part declared that its principles were the following “the construction of a new democratic republic based on four freedoms: national freedom, political freedom, economic freedom and ideological freedom”, “the nationalization of large-scale enterprises and the redistribution of land to farmers”, “the shortening of working hours and the implementation of various social insurance projects for labor”, and “the realization of compulsory and vocational education, and the implementation of social insurance projects at government expense”. The National Revolutionary Party renamed itself as the Korean People’s Republic Party in 1947. However, it continued to adhere to its initial belief in the need for the construction of a social democratic state. In reality, as seen by the following quote attributed to the temporary government, “our political ambitions are more advanced than that of the Labor Party of England”, the various theories for the construction of a new state promoted by the main political actors of the day were essentially not all that different from each other.\(^\text{11}\)

The National Independence League established by a centrist group in October 1947 announced its platform as follows “At this moment, Chosŏn is able to construct neither a proletariat society nor a monopolistic capitalist society, but rather should establish a Koreanized democratic society as the current situation of Chosŏn demands, a development which has occurred as a historic result that no government or ideology can change”\(^\text{12}\) while also emphasizing the necessity for social democratic policies. Bae, Sung-ryong, who was a representative theorist of the centrist camp and an active supporter of the political principles and policies advocated by the National Independence League, insisted that the construction of a new state should not be based on American ‘golden democracy’ or Soviet ‘one-party rule or dictatorial democracy’, but on a ‘new Koreanized form of democracy’. By ‘new democracy’, Bae meant a parliamentary democracy based on
a multiparty system politically that also stressed the need for a social equality system in the socio-economical sector and for a mixed economic system supplemented by efficient capitalist factors. Therefore, this new democracy can be seen as sharing many similarities with social democracy.\textsuperscript{13}

The centrist camp was divided into a center-left and a center-right wing depending on the degree of individuals’ acceptance of socialist theory. Therefore, although there were differences in the centrist camp with regards to the theory of state construction that varied according to the faction to which one belonged, overall the main concept pursued was the social democratic theory of state construction, which had succeeded the theory of national state construction that had been promoted by the independence movement during the unified front era.

Nevertheless, the control exerted by the U.S. and the Soviet Union over the Korean peninsula had a great impact on the Korean government. Moreover, the growingly open ideologically based rift between the left and the right in Korea made the achievement of a unified national state an arduous task. As a result, the only means to overcome the growing ideological and systematic confrontation and establish a unified national state was through the construction of a unified government or through the installation of a centrist administration. As such, there is a need to separately analyze what kind of policies such a government would have pursued.

If in fact a government led by the centrist camp had been established, there is no assurance that it would have supported the establishment of a social democratic system. There also exists the significant possibility that a unified government might have opted for a system with social democratic characteristics, an assumption made all the more plausible when one looks at the objectives of the movement for constructing a unified state or of the movement promoted by the left-right alliance after liberation. For example,
the left-right alliance committee declared 7 principles that included left and right wing ideals, while still supporting the social democratic theory of state construction of the centrist camp.

Despite being limited in many ways by opposition from the left and the right, the main movement behind the push for a unified government, led by the centrist camp, continuously expanded as its support base grew stronger. The number of people who identified themselves as being in the centrist party or group was slightly less than those who identified with either the right or left wings. Additionally, according to a survey carried out by the U.S. military government, the number of individuals who proclaimed themselves to be supporters of socialism was 70% while those who favored capitalism or communism made up 14% and 7% respectively. The term socialism during this period was taken to mean social democracy. When all of this is taken into consideration, it becomes clear that the majority supported social democracy as a main ideology to bring about a unified state.

The opposite political structures and ideologies that emerged after liberation narrowed the room for political compromise, which resulted in social democratic policies being rejected by both the left and right wings and on occasion being considered as opportunistic, reactionary or pro-communist by either the U.S. or the Soviet military structures. However, far from being a mutually exclusive or rejectionist theory, the social democratic approach exhibited strong characteristics of a convergent ideology capable of overcoming the ideological oppositions of both communism and capitalism. The characteristics of this movement are historically significant in that social democracy was more than simply a centrist approach and due to the fact that it played a significant ideological role in efforts to establish a unified state.

**Social Democratic Movement in Divided Korea**
The deepening cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union and the division imposed on Korea made any political activities deemed to be a deviation from the prevailing ideology impossible. The ultra-right wing and anti-communist government in South Korea made it almost impossible for the social democratic camp or unification-oriented nationalists to propagate their message. After the Korean War broke out on June 25th, 1950, this trend became even more serious, eventually leading the government of South Korea to condemn the social democratic camp and label it as a pro-communist party. As a result, the term socialism in South Korea no longer was understood as a general concept that included social democracy but was redefined to equate Marxism or Leninism, a development that forced all political forces with social democratic characteristics to conduct their activities under the guise of the Social or Social Democratic Party, or of the Progressive Party, sometimes going under the name of the Innovative Party or Minjung Party to conceal their true ideological hue.

Following the implementation of the division, the first party to appear that pursued a socialist agenda was the Social Party led by Cho, So-ang. Most of the political forces that had participated in the movement to establish a unified state after liberation did not participate in the national election held in May 1948, instead seeking to erect an independent government, while continuing to promote a practical approach to politics, found their numbers swelling as a result of the addition of many famed individuals at the time of the formation of the new government. Cho also resigned from the Korean Independence Party to establish the Social Party, along with his followers who shared the same beliefs, emphasizing the necessity for a new opposition party, especially on ideological grounds.

The Social Party asserted in its party manifesto that, “our people want neither a dictatorship of the proletariat, nor the pseudo-democratic politics of the privileged class. Rather they are
eager to bring about an equal society based on the Korean constitution”¹⁴ while also making clear their opposition to any form of dictatorship. Along with this, the Social Party promoted ‘the politics for all people’ (全民政治) that was based on the Sam Kyun theory, a planned economy, and universal education at government expense. The social democratic nature of the Social Party is clearly reflected in the name it chose for itself despite the extreme right wing and anti-communist political system that prevailed at the time. Moreover, although the party’s theory of peaceful unification based on cooperation between the two Koreas was based on ‘anti-communism’, it nevertheless was meaningful in that it provided a potential methodology to bring about national unification. Those who were in favor of the establishment of South-North negotiations, individuals from the centrist camp along with the National Independence League as well as the Social Party participated in the May 30th election of 1950. Despite the political suppression of the Rhee, Syng-man(李承晩) administration, many notable centrist individuals including Cho, So-ang, were elected to the National assembly, enabling the centrists to form an organizational structure and promote democratic reform and peaceful unification. However, as a result of the Korean War that broke out on June 25th of 1950, their political agenda could not be implemented.

As such, centrists, who suddenly found themselves with no outlets for their political activities began to rally around Cho, Bong-am(曺奉岩), eventually leading to the establishment of the Progressive Party (進步黨) in 1955. The Progressive Party rejected capitalists, individuals suspected of corruption, as well as a communist dictatorship; instead emphasizing the importance of implementing innovative politics. Examining the current situation of Korea, the party considered that there was an urgent need to promote productivity. However, it maintained that liberal capitalism was useless and inefficient in bringing this about, and
that as such a popular and scientific social democracy, in other words a planned democracy, should be created to rectify this situation. Moreover, the Progressive Party presented theories for peaceful unification of the country, of the underprivileged classes, and for the creation of a planned economy that were all based on social democracy.\textsuperscript{15}

Cho, Bong-am ran as a candidate in the presidential election of 1956 based on his comprehensive economic plan and his plan for peaceful unification despite the fact that any mention of the latter was seen as taboo at the time. Despite the tremendous suppression and flagrant election fraud committed by Rhee, Syng-man and his supporters, Cho, Bong-am managed to get 2.16 million votes in the election, instantly becoming Rhee’s biggest political rival. Although the Progressive Party lost the election, its influence continued to spread, as did its support among many segments of the population, as it prepared for the election to be held in 1958. However, this was all brought to an end as a result of the Progressive Party affair.

Along with the Progressive Party, the Social Democratic Party(民主社會黨) led by Chung, Hwa-am (鄭華岩) and the Democratic Innovative Party(民主革新黨) led by Seo, Sang-il(徐相日) also proclaimed their social democratic leanings. At the end of the 1950s, the social democratic camp used the liberal democracy system to mobilize the ‘underprivileged classes’, as part of their goals of overcoming the inherent contradictions of capitalism and achieving peaceful national unification. Though their efforts were thwarted by the Rhee, Syng-man administration, they nonetheless had a great influence on the history of social democracy in Korea.

Following the collapse of the extreme right wing anti-communism promoted by the Rhee, Syng-man administration in the aftermath of the April 19\textsuperscript{th} Revolution, centrists suddenly found themselves with more breathing room as the external situation also became more favorable to their reemergence. In
other words, there existed, as exhibited in the April 19th revolution, such a demand for democracy that the main political issue became one of conservative politics vs. progressive politics. Moreover, international developments, such as the summit between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, which sparked the belief that the Cold War structure might be dismantled, the innovative politics practiced by the Nehru administration in India and the Nasser government in Egypt, favored the rise of the centrists in Korea.

The first task of the centrist camp was the formation of a political organization. Therefore, there were various attempts to establish a social democratic party, which eventually resulted in the advent of the Social Public Party (社會大衆黨) prior to the election held on July 7th, 1960. This Social Public Party asserted that “the presence of an ideological basis or theoretical principle is the utmost form of democracy or democratic socialism”, and that “the form of democratic socialism we develop should combine Korean characteristics with the universal norms upheld by the international community”, 16 while declaring that theirs was a public party that sought to bring about democratic socialism based on the particular characteristics of the Korean case.

While there were high expectations that many proponents of the social democratic agenda would be elected to the National Assembly in the election held in the summer of 1960, only 8 out of the total 197 members elected to the House of Representatives and House of Councilors were proponents of this ideology, with their take of the election vote a measly 7% of the overall total. In the aftermath of this miserable result, the social democratic camp was decimated by an internal feud and the emergence of different opinions over how to bring about South-North negotiations as well as over what constituted the centrist approach to unification, all of which led to a splitting of the movement into the Social Public Party, the Innovative Party, the Social Party, and the Unification Social Party. 17
During the period of the April 19th Revolution, the social democratic camp was at the forefront of the unification movement along with the students, and actively promoted the use of public demonstrations against the Korean-American Economic Treaty and the two-evil laws known as the Anti-Communist Law & Anti-Demonstration Law. In addition, they developed ways of bringing about closer cooperation with Western social democracies. The social democratic camp was however for all intent and purpose, destroyed by the military coup carried out on May 16th, 1961 and the subsequent arrest of all of their leaders, and as a result of the modifications made to the national security law as well as by the establishment of a new Anti-Communist Law.

The limitations of the social democratic camp; its inability to develop into a true grassroots movement due to the disorganized nature of the movement, and its failure to properly grasp the U.S. policies toward the Korean peninsula that were aimed at the establishment of an anti-communist state, eventually led to their downfall. However, contributions made by the movement, such as its unshaken promotion of democratic ideals, so as to achieve an equal society and expand political participation, as well as its development of a blueprint for a future unified state, and active and tireless promotion of unification efforts, make it so that the role of the social democratic movement should never be forgotten.

Following the Park, Chung-hee(朴正熙) regime’s rise to power in the aftermath of the May 16th military coup, the activities of the social democratic camp were severely curtailed, which eventually led the movement to be even further splintered with some joining the military regime, others promoting the democratic movement alongside conservative forces and yet another group restructuring the movement and continuing the fight. However, even this group that claimed to still be true to the original social democratic movement eventually became an establishment party after the implementation of the Yushin reforms in 1972. Under the Chon,
Doo-hwan & Roh, Tae-woo(全斗煥-盧泰愚) regimes of the 1980s, the Social Party(社會黨) led by Kim, Chol(金哲) and the Democratic Social Party(社會民主黨) led by Koh, Jung-hoon(高貞勳) emerged as true proponents of the old social democratic line; however their efforts did not lead to any significant achievements.

During the period immediately before and following the advent of the 1990’s, the internal and external political situation underwent many changes. As an example, the military regime, to which opposition to had been the rallying cry of the democratic struggle, came to an end and a government of the people was on the verge of emerging. In addition, progressive forces held the belief that the imminent ‘collapse’ of world communism could lead social democracy to once again emerge as a viable ‘alternative’. Therefore, the social democratic camp that had ceaselessly promoted the democratic struggle under the military regime began to reorient itself as a party of the people.

Presently, the Social Party and the Democratic Labor Party are the main progressive parties. The main platform of the Social Party include its call for the achievement of socialism and its belief that North Korea is not fit to lead the anti-capitalist movement. On the other hand, the Democratic Labor Party has announced that it is seeking the advent of grassroots politics in which laborers and the public have their voices heard, the establishment of a democratic economic system to overcome the contradictions of capitalism, and unification based on independent, peaceful, and nation-wide cooperation. As such, the Democratic Labor Party is seen as supporting the advent of a social democracy. Significantly, the Democratic Labor Party became the 3rd ranked party by securing 8.1% of the overall vote in the June 13th local elections and 950,000 votes in the December 19th Presidential election, all of which augurs well for the possibility of social democracy emerging as a new political force.
In the present situation in which two different political systems exist on the Korean peninsula, it may not be reasonable to define the political ideals that the progressive camp has sought through a single concept. However, broadly speaking, it can be argued that the progressive camp has supported social democracy. In addition, unlike other political forces, the social democratic camp never veered from its support for the struggle for social democracy, a factor that combined with its role at the forefront of the peaceful unification movement, should lead us to be thankful for its contributions.

Then, what does in fact constitute a desirable system for a unified state? The unified state should eventually pursue a combined form of public-ownership and grassroots politics, while excluding the form of capitalism practiced in South Korea in which only a few individuals control the economy and the state socialism based on state ownership and totalitarian political system as practiced in North Korea. On this point, any future unified state should be developed as a public-led ‘unified democratic welfare state’. Here it should be pointed out that to achieve this goal both sides should approach a position akin to social democracy in order to combine the positive aspects of the South and North Korean political systems.

In order to achieve a unified Korea, there should be active communication and cooperation between the two Koreas along with a unification-oriented centrist camp that could play a mediation role in bringing about an end to the cold war that persists on the peninsula. Therefore, social democracy continues to be a relevant ideology.

Conclusion—Historical Characteristics of Korea’s Social Democracy
The concept of social democracy in Korea emerged as a result of the process of ideological development rather than simply being something that was directly accepted from the Western world. Therefore, Korea’s social democracy shares similarities to the variety practiced in the West while at the same time being a practical ideology exhibiting inherently Korean characteristics. In addition, it is necessary to pay attention to the fact that Korea’s social democracy was formed during the process of finding the ideological basis for the national independence movement and during the period in which the unified front emerged.

The ideologies or philosophy that demonstrated characteristics of social democracy during the national independence movement include the theory of Sam Kyun and Socialist Nationalism. More specifically, the Sam Kyun theory is significant in that it served as the essential basis for the theory of national state construction promoted by the right wing during the national independence movement, and that it eventually became the basic theory of the unified front. Moreover, while the main factions within the national independence movement developed different theories of state construction according to their own ideologies and politics, they found common ground in the social democratic view during the period in which the unified front was being promoted; a development which enabled people to envisage the contours of what an independent nation state would look like after liberation.

After liberation, those social democrats that had participated in the national independence movement joined forces with the centrist camp, which resulted in the expansion of their influence. Under the circumstances in which confrontation between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, as well as the ideological conflict between the left and right wings prevailed, the realistic way to establish an independent unified state was to create a centrist political force or a unified government. Given the circumstances, there was a high possibility that the theory of state construction based on social
democracy would be adopted as a national system, which was in fact the wish of most people.

The cold war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, and the emergence of two political systems in Korea did not allow any room for any political activities that were deemed as going against the grain. South Korea, which was led by an extreme anti-communist government, prevented social democracy or any unification-oriented nationalist activities from emerging. Nonetheless, the importance of this social democratic camp should be recognized in that it constantly led the struggle to bring about a social democracy and peaceful unification.

After ‘practical socialism’ in the old Soviet Union and Eastern Europe collapsed, a ‘3rd way’ based on social democracy gained popularity, but eventually faded from the scene. However, there is a need to stress the point that a left wing pursuing social democracy rose to become influential within many countries in Western Europe, along with the fact that although capitalism continued to expand, it was increasingly modified to incorporate tenets of socialism. Additionally, due to the fact that both a market economy based on new liberalism and socialism centered on the state have been criticized as not providing a viable alternative for the 21st century, there is a need to study social democracy more closely.

While It is true that social democracy in Korea was unable to take root as a result of the cold war structure and the ideological confrontation on the peninsula, Korea’s social democracy did provide the ideological basis for the theory of national state construction during the Japanese era, an ideology to establish a unified state after liberation, while also playing a role as the ideological basis for social democracy and the unification movement in this era of the two Koreas. In other words, the social democracy that the centrist camp pursued was not only an ideology resistant to the colonial system and the two Korea system,
but also played the role of a convergent ideology used to overcome the ideological conflict and erect a unified national state. In short, Korea’s social democracy has strong historical significance in that it is closely connected to the movements attempting to resolve the problems that have emerged in the contemporary period such as the establishment of a unified state, the realization of social democracy and the liberation of all human-beings.

Notes:

1 Social democracy can be defined as a political ideology that attempts to bring about a society based on the socialism through moderate reforms such as the introduction of a parliamentary system, rather than through rapid innovation based on class dictatorship. On the contrary, democratic socialism can be distinguished from social democracy in that the former follows the basic structure and logics of capitalism. However, social democracy in Korea as understood in this paper refers to the same concept as democratic socialism.

2 Socialism was introduced into Korea along with China and Japan in the 1880s and began to be accepted on an individual level. (Lee, Ho-ryong, Anarchism in Korea- Chapter Ideology- (Jisik Sanupsa, 2001), pp.355-356).

3 For more information on the Righteous Brotherhood’s veer toward socialism, refer to Kang, Man-kil, National Revolutionary Party and the Unified Front (Hwa Pyung Sa, 1991), pp.30-46.


7 Yeo, Un-Hong, MongYang Yeo, Un-hyeong (Chunghakak, 1967), p149.
The ideology of the communists and the neutrals was referred to as ‘advanced democracy’ or ‘real democracy’. As seen here, the reason they used this term to hide their direct political ideology was because the unified front along with right-wing forces and the American military government regarded the various socialist factions as being communists or left-wingers.


For more information of the contents and characteristics of the new democracy advocated by Bae, Sung-ryong, refer to Study of Socialism in Korea’s modern century by Kim, Ki-seung (1994), pp.253-309.


Chung, Tae-young, Political History of Korea’s Social Democracy (Sei Myung Publications (1995), pp.546-547.

Lee, Ki-taek, History of Korea’s Opposition Parties (Baeksan Publications, 1987), pp.142-143; Chung Tae-young, previous citation, pp. 548-560.

Although there were parties that accepted social democracy as a leading ideology in the 1950s in Korea, there was no trading relationship with ‘international socialism’ organized in 1951. However, the Unification Social Party established in January 1961 applied for membership of the Socialist International and became a regular member in 1969 after first becoming ‘special member’ of the Socialist International in June 1963. But, the Unification Social Party was dismantled in October 1980 after having been severely suppressed by
the military government. Moreover, the Social Democratic Party created in the 1980s dispatched a representative to the Lima General Meeting of the Socialist International in June 1986, but was cancelled with its party registration next year.
