

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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# The trajectory of anti-communism in South Korea

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## Abstract

This article deals with the historical trajectory of anti-communism in South Korea since 1945. Anti-communism has been working as a powerful ideological and institutional constraint to suppress political opposition to authoritarian regimes and to hinder development of critical thoughts in South Korea. However, the demise of East European socialist countries and globalization has transformed the nature of anti-communism, by equating non-market ideologies with communism. Even though there have been political and economic change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, anti-communism has still played an important role in constraining policy development as well as political discourse.

**Keywords:** Anti-communism, The Cold War, Authoritarianism, Globalization, South Korea

## Introduction

Anti-communism, as a product of the Cold War, has played a tremendous role in Korean politics and society as a hegemonic ideology to justify authoritarian governments' repression of political dissidents and progressive political activities. It has also hindered the development of modern party politics based on social cleavages, as the military regime applied the National Security Law to block political critiques of the regime and exclude socialist political parties from the political arena. Anti-communism, the National Security Law and Intelligence Organizations were the three main pillars of the military rule in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, anti-communism has been the core part of the three repressive pillars, legitimizing the brutal oppression of political dissidents and the frequent violation of human rights by the police and intelligence agency. Even after the collapse of communist regimes in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, new anti-communism still operates as a strong ideological barrier to the full-fledged democracy.

However, anti-communism in South Korea has evolved through several stages as international and domestic politics have been changing. The formative period of anti-communism began right after the Second World War with the formation of the Cold War System based on the new military conflicts between the USSR and the USA. Instead of purging Koreans who collaborated with the Japanese occupation in Korea, the United States of America Military Government in Korea (USAMGK), occupying Korea south of 38<sup>th</sup> parallel from August 1945 to August 1948, recruited them as police chiefs and administrative staff to govern the newly liberated country. With the escalation of the conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States, anti-communism

became a predominant ideology to get rid of political opponents and agitators against the trusteeship by the United States in South Korea. Those who were the tool of the Japanese colonial rule took the leading role in repressing political opposition again in the period of the liberation of Korea from Japan.

After the Korean War, anti-communism became the core of dominant political ideologies, overriding all other political ideologies. Both civilian dictatorship in the 1950s and military regime in the 1960s and 1970s had consistently mobilized the strong anti-communist sentiment. As a result, after the Korean War anti-communism became the single most important principle suppressing ideological debates and political critiques. Anti-communism has played a role in shaping both political consciousness and psyche among the people, intensifying self-censorship and the distrust of political discourses. Thus the military regime frequently invoked anti-communism to legitimize its restriction on civil rights and political freedom (Choi 1993: 21-24).

This paper discusses the trajectory of anti-communism in South Korea, exploring its changing nature and mutation with regard to changing domestic politics and international relations. Focusing on anti-communism as mass psychological aspect and political mobilization, I will analyze the changing dynamics of the nature of anti-communism and its persistent political efficacy even after democratization in South Korea. Articulation of anti-communism with the threat from North Korea has been made by organizations in civil society as well as the state apparatus. The deep rooted anti-communism has been reinforced by frequent exposures of North Korea as an axis of evil. Although anti-communism is a vague ideology for the mass, it still exerts profound impact on political discourses with regard to welfare and the market in the post Cold War period, revealing a significant transformation of the nature of anti-communism. While the conservative governments utilized it for reinforcing the threat from North Korea and curtailing political opposition,<sup>1</sup> anti-communism becomes a contested concept or ideology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in South Korea.

### **Origins of anti-communism in South Korea**

The sudden defeat of the Japanese military against the allied forces temporarily brought about a power vacuum in the Korean peninsula right after the announcement of unconditional surrender by the Japanese Emperor in August 15, 1945. While the United States prepared for the occupation of Japan during the Second World War, it did not have any specific plans for Korea, a former Japanese colony. The Supreme Commander for the Allied Power (SCAP) under General Douglas MacArthur launched massive demilitarization policies to transform the Japanese society from the beginning of occupation of Japan. But the United States of America Military Government in Korea (USAMGIK) was formed by the 24<sup>th</sup> US Army Corps without any blueprints for occupation of South Korea. Originally the 24th Army Corps of the United States was planned to occupy Japan after it successfully invaded Okinawa. But it was suddenly redirected toward Korea without any preparation for the occupation of Korea in advance. The US considered Korea not as an independent state but as a colony of Japan.

The 24<sup>th</sup> Army Corps moved to the southern part of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in Korea in September. Thus, the Soviet army occupied the northern part of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel, whereas the US army occupied the southern part of the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel in Korea. The division of the Korean peninsula by the Soviet Union and the United States was the

beginning of the long and turbulent saga of anti-communism in South Korea. As the Cold War between the communist bloc and the capitalist bloc escalated more, the Korean peninsula became the forefront of the military conflicts between the Soviet Union and the United States that lasted from 1948 to 1992.

The formation of anti-communism at the early stage in South Korea was a complex outcome of interplay of many factors: The domestic politics in South Korea and the role of the USAMIK, the rise of anti-communism in the American politics, and the intensification of the international conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States after 1945. The domestic politics under the trusteeship of the USAMIK was the beginning of the formation of anti-communism in South Korea. Anti-communism in South Korea was led by the Korean elite who supported the Japanese colonial rule in the colonial period. The SCAP in Japan launched sweeping reform policies to get rid of the militarist institutions and policies, executing war criminals including military, business oligarchs and bureaucrats (Cohen 1987; Gordon 1993). At least until 1947, when the reverse course was taken by the SCAP, demilitarization and democratization were the two most important keywords representing the policy principles of the SCAP in postwar Japan (Hanneman 2013: 84-98). Extensive reform policies in education, business, politics and military were launched by the SCAP. Thus massive reforms had continued until the reverse course, reviving major economic and political groups to face the threat from the USSR, was taken by the SCAP.

In contrast, there was no purge of the pro-Japanese groups and social elites in South Korea at that time (Lee 2010). Furthermore, the USAMG recruited officials for the military government among former administrative staff who were working for the Japanese Governor General in Korea. The USAMG didn't have any information or knowledge about Korea. It recruited Koreans with experiences of administrative works including police men. Thus, Koreans working for Japan were not purged at all. Instead, they could maintain their positions and power even after the liberation from Japan in August, 1945. Only thing that changed was their affiliation from the Japanese Governor General in Korea to the United States of America Military Government. It betrayed the expectations of the people, that is, the purge of traitors. The return of traitors to power became a source of anger and protests of the people in 1946. However, the ruling elite and the USAMG considered local protests as communist insurgency supported by the Soviet Union or the North Korean communist party (Cumings 1981; Moon 2005, 23-44).

The shift of domestic politics in the United States strongly affected the postwar policy in South Korea as well as Japan. Harry Truman who succeeded Franklin Roosevelt adopted the Truman Doctrine which attempted to contain Soviet expansion. It was a radical shift of the relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union from the wartime alliance during the Second World War to the peacetime enemy in the postwar period, signaling the beginning of the Cold War. George Kennan's containment policy against the Soviet Union was implemented in East Asia as well as Western Europe (Kennan 1947). Thus, the comprehensive reform in Japan was halted in 1948. Accordingly, there was a fundamental shift of principles of occupation policy of the SCAP from demilitarization and democratization to rebuilding Japan as a front of anti-communist expansion in Asia, by reviving the old imperial elites as well as Japanese big corporations. The restoration completely changed the occupation policy of the SCAP to make Japan a bulwark against the Soviets (Cumings 1988: 247). American staff and

advisors in the SCAP in the reform period, mostly New Deal liberals (Takemae 1988: 93-96), were suspicioned of some connection with communists by George Kennan (Cohen 1987; 415-416). Thus, so the called "reverse course" by the SCAP took place more bluntly in Japan (Cumings 1993: 34-63).

After 3 years of trusteeship of USAMG, South Korea could establish an independent government in August, 1948. In 1948, the First Republic introduced the National Security Law (NSL) which purported to promote national security by outlawing any activities that might be beneficial to communist activities and eventually North Korea. Illegal activities included anti-state activists, dissemination of communist ideas, organization of communist groups, etc. The NSL had been frequently used to oppress political opposition by the Syngman Rhee government. For example, Syngman Lee got rid of Bong Am Cho, the chairman of the Progressive Party, who was the rival to Syngman Rhee in the 1956 presidential elections. He proposed a peaceful unification policy which was far different from Syngman Rhee's unification policy by military invasion. In 1959, Bong Am Cho was charged of violation of the National Security Law. He was executed right after the verdict by the court without due process. Any other anti-government activists were accused of violating the National Security Law under the Syngman Rhee government.

The National Security Law was completely abolished in April 19, 1960 when Syngman Lee stepped down as president and fled to Hawaii after the nationwide student protests against his dictatorial rule. However, after two months the new National Security Law was established with significant revision or deletion of some codes violating civil rights. Another significant revision of the NSL was done in 1991 when the Socialist bloc in Eastern Europe was dissolved and the Cold War System had been disappearing. One of key changes was that the NSL should be confined to organizations or associations to overthrow the government. Those who do not report those organizations are not penalized anymore by the revised NSL in 1991.

The Anti-communism Law was another institutional component of anti-communism in South Korea. The military government which replaced civilian government by the military coup in May 16, 1961 introduced the Anti-communism Law. Claiming anti-communism as the national policy, the military government attempted to punish opposition movements affiliated with or affected by communist organizations. It made appraisal and incitement of communism illegal. It also made those who knew someone violating the Anti-communism Law but did not report them to the police punishable.

However, the Anti-communism Law was revised several times because it overlapped with the NSL and outdated with the change of international relations in December 31, 1980. The normalization of diplomatic relationship between the USA and communist China shattered the ideological core of anti-communism. In addition, the withdrawal of the US army from Vietnam in 1975 was another shock to the authoritarian regime in Korea. The military regime strengthened its ideological control by terrifying opposition movements and ideological challenges. The reign of terror by secret police and intelligence organizations for surveillance of the people was intensified. However, it was abolished in December 31, 1980, when the new military regime seized the power after president Park Chung-hee was assassinated by the chief of Korea Central Intelligence Agency (KCIA). Mainly because the Anti-communism Law overlapped with the NSL,

the Anti-communism Law was abolished and some parts of the Anti-communism Law were transferred to the National Security Law.

### **Democratization, globalization and anti-communism**

One of the key changes democratization brought about was the more concerted challenges of political opposition to the authoritarian institutions and rules. While the democratic struggle succeeded in ending the military regime in the summer of 1987, there were entrenched authoritarian institutions and norms which could not be easily eradicated by democratic elections. Though major changes of explicit authoritarian institutions such as the revision of the Constitution, the election of political leaders and abolition of restriction of civil rights were made, the legacy of authoritarian regime was ingrained in culture and practice of the state apparatus and civil society. Thus the transition to democracy should include not only an introduction of the democratic rules of game but also the inculcation of new democratic values and attitudes among the power holders and the ordinary people as well.

However, it was a contentious process to reform or abolish the authoritarian state apparatus because of the transition to democracy by pact and the winning of an ex-military general at the first competitive presidential election in December 1987. While struggles for democracy were fierce and militant, the political negotiation between the opposition party and the ruling party was made, excluding political dissidents and activists who led the street protests. The opposition party did not fully represent the political opposition in the civil society. As a result, the democratic transition by pact paved the way to a limited democracy in which the ruling authoritarian elites could maneuver their power in the negotiation for institutional reform (Choi 1997; Shin 2012).

In addition, with the split of opposition candidates, Roh Tae Woo could enjoy *tertius gaudens*, minimizing the impact of democratization on the vested interests of the ruling authoritarian blocs. In spite of mass protests for the end of authoritarian legacy in various aspects, it was a contested terrain affected by the shift of power balance between the authoritarian regime and the challengers. The continuation of the authoritarian regime with the victory of the ruling party significantly delayed the democratic reforms and contributed to rehabilitate the conservative political and social forces. The democratic transition in South Korea ended up with the maintenance of the National Security Law (Kim 1997; Kim 2011: ch.4).

Though the conservative regime succeeded in keeping the NSL intact, there have been continuous attempts to abolish or revise it. Because the legal framework fully institutionalized anti-communism has been an instrument for oppressing political dissidents and social movements, civil society organizations attempted to abolish or at least revise it. However, the repressive state apparatus dealing with public security office in prosecutor's office, police and intelligence agency remained unchanged.<sup>2</sup>

When democratic parties came into power, the NSL became a hot political issue, intensifying ideological conflicts due to the fierce opposition from the conservative party. In addition, conservative media, churches and civil organizations formed by the military regime raised so strong and persistent opposition to the abolition of the NSL that the NSL could be maintained even under the civilian governments (Kim 2011: ch. 5). Conservative political forces claimed that the NSL was the backbone of the Republic of Korea and should be maintained even after the regime change.

The greatest contestation in relation with the NSL occurred during the Roh Moo-hyun government. While there was an attempt to abolish the National Security Law in 1990 by an appeal to the Constitutional Court by progressive activists, the Constitutional Court ruled the NSL constitutional because its main goal was to protect liberal democracy. As the Prosecutor's Office indicted Song Doo-Ryul, a Korean German professor at Münster University, for violating the National Security Law, another drive for abolition of the NSL started in 2004.<sup>3</sup> In the end, he was sentenced to 7 years in prison for violating the National Security Law. The debate on Song's case made the NSL the most contested issue again in 2004.

The debate contributed to establish not only the concerted effort of the progressive groups to abolish the NSL but also to the consolidation of conservative forces. The consecutive defeat of the conservative party in the 2002 presidential election made conservative political blocs and social blocs unite and eventually ended up with the formation of the National Association of the New Right (NANR) in 2005. It was a civil organization composed of diverse conservative social groups. It worked as a corresponding conservative organization in civil society with the conservative opposition party. The conservative party succeeded in organizing conservative and even reactionary social groups in the civil society in which protestant church leaders played the key role.<sup>4</sup> Church leaders accused any attempts to change the NSL as suspicious activities to benefit North Korea. Thus, the NANR vehemently opposed attempts to abolish or revise the NSL by the ruling party and democratic social forces. Because the opposition to the revision of the NSL was so fierce, some ruling party members were reluctant to support the revision because the public opinion for the revision was not so good in their local constituencies. In 2005, the ruling party and the opposition party agreed on the necessity of the revision of the NSL and submitted bills for revision of it, they failed to revise it due to the disagreement in details.

Thus the NSL, the legacy of Draconian dictatorship, has been maintained through eight attempts of revision even under the democratic regime. As Amnesty International reports, the NSL still curtails "freedom of expression and association" and, in particular, the Article 7 was abused to restrict civil rights and political freedom.<sup>5</sup> Thus, anti-communism as an embedded ideology of the NSL still remains intact.

### **Reconfiguration of anti-communism**

Everyday anti-communism has been challenged and rearticulated due to the collapse of the Cold War and restructuring of the international relations in the post-Cold War period. While the impact of the normalization of the relationship between the USA and communist China in the 1970s was limited due to the control of information of it, the normalization of the diplomatic relationship between South Korea and communist China was a shock to conservative forces. Nevertheless, Rho Tae Woo, the ex-military general and the first elected president since 1968, initiated the Northern Policy to normalize diplomatic relations with Russia and China. Both were engaged in the Korean War and are still allies of North Korea. Former enemy states were accepted as states with diplomatic relations. Mainland China is a country controlled by the Chinese Communist Party.

The confusion caused by the Northern Policy was resolved by the switch of perception of anti-communism from the ideological dimension to real politics. That is,

anti-communism could be limitedly interpreted as anti-North Korea. Anti-communism has been focused on anti-North Korea as a dangerous and unpredictable communist country. It implies that keeping national security from the threat by North Korea is the most important task of governments in South Korea. As North Korea has been depicted as a rogue state, anti-communism has been considered as anti-North Korea. Thus the extension of the binary opposition between good and bad to the opposition between South Korea and North Korea has been made.

However, there has been a gray area in other fields of ideological discourse. In terms of international relations, there existed a successful distance between communism as an ideology and the really existing communist country. Anti-communism has been articulated with other economic and political ideologies. In particular, employers' organizations tried to equate non-market orientation with communism. Among others, non-market orientation includes the state centered provision of welfare and the state regulation of the economy. Those organizations consider a non-market ideology as a variant of communism. In particular, conservative media attempted to equate critiques of the liberal market with pro-socialist or pro-communist ideologies. Sometimes in conservative newspapers and conservative political commentators it includes social democracy as a part of communism.

The welfare discourse during the presidential election campaign in 2012 resulted in the change of everyday communism which does not make any difference between communism and social democracy. Nevertheless, the discursive field regarding communism and anti-communism has been frequently transformed due to the shift of international and domestic politics. Because political parties in South Korea have not been formed along with ideological cleavages, political conflicts have taken place at the discursive level with populist demagoguery and ideological mobilization. Labeling opponents as communists or pro-North Korea has been quite common during the electoral competition at various levels. Sporadic military provocations or nuclear bomb tests reinforced the threat of communist country, North Korea, at the everyday discourse of the people. Thus the conservative party has skillfully utilized the threat by North Korea to mobilize the fear of North Korea, describing it as an irrational and unpredictable rogue state. Thus the threat by North Korea has been beneficial to the conservative party for the last three decades. Thus, the "hostile symbiosis" has been formed and maintained between the North Korean regime and the conservative political party in South Korea.

Education is another arena in which anti-communism yields power. Recently, the conservative government charged the current historical textbooks with the leftist bias, educating pro-North Korean contents to students. In particular, it argues that historical text books denigrate economic and political achievement by authoritarian governments since 1945. The conservative government wants to replace the current historical textbooks by new one written by the conservative scholars. Thus, teaching the Korean history of 20<sup>th</sup> century in a single textbook written by scholars, mostly non-historians, becomes the most controversial affair in education. As the conservative government tries to monopolize the narrative of modern Korean history arguing the purge of historical textbooks from communist influences, historians and other scholars raise street protests against the conservative government's monopoly of the historical memory.

## Conclusion

Anti-communism has diverse variants across countries. Anti-communism in South Korea was formed along with the development of the Cold War right after the liberation of Korea from the Japanese colonial rule. Under the heavy influence of the United States, anti-communist regimes have been formed and maintained in forms of civilian dictatorship or military dictatorship. Dictatorial regimes utilized communist threats to justify dictatorship and restriction on civil rights. Thus, the national security has been considered as equivalent to anti-communism, because the northern part of Korea was occupied by the Soviets and later by the Korean communist regime.

The National Security Law has been an institutional backbone of anti-communism since 1948. In addition to the National Security Law, the military government introduced the Anti-communism Law, the redundancy of the two laws ended up with the merge of the two laws into the National Security Law. In spite of several revisions, the National Security Law has been maintained and applied to restrict civil rights seriously, as Amnesty International accused.

However, the shift of international relations and the collapse of the Cold War system transformed the ideological space of anti-communism, generating conflicts and temporary confusion with regard to anti-communism since 1992 when the conservative government normalized the diplomatic relationship with mainland China and Russia. State officials interpreted and implemented the National Security Law in practice. However, the discursive power of state officials has been challenged as democratization proceeded.

Along with the imminent threat by North Korea on South Korea, anti-communism has been taught and internalized through various state and non-state apparatuses. Everyday anti-communism has been formed and reformed with the change of domestic and international politics. While the application of the National Security Law is not as frequent as before during the military rule and anti-communism is not as strong as before, it is still effective in the political discourse during elections because there were several provocations by North Korea. The meaning of anti-communism has been confined to anti-North Korea.

Nevertheless, there are ambiguous gray areas in ideological discourses in South Korea where political discourses on diverse ideologies have not been developed under the authoritarian regimes. Thus, anti-communism can be easily invoked in other discourses such as discourse on welfare and education. Critiques of the welfare state rely on critique of communism in their articulation of the logic of anti-welfare state. Critiques of state's regulation of education also mention the inefficiency of education in the communist regime. Thus, anti-communism could be easily articulated with other ideologies. That might be a dangerous development for the next generation.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Amnesty International reported that "Between 2008 and 2011, the number of new cases has increased from 46 to 90; an increase of 95.6 per cent. The number of detentions under NSL charges has doubled from 16 in 2008 to 32 in 2010 but has registered a decline to 19 in 2011. However, this increase bucked a declining trend before 2008. According to the National Prosecutors' Office, the number of new NSL investigation



(*ipgon*) cases had been in decline - from 231 in 2002 to 46 in 2008. Similarly, detentions under NSL charges dropped from 131 in 2002 to 16 in 2008”(2012: 20)

<sup>2</sup>Kim (2013) reports details of the politics of state terror to deal with political challenges to authoritarian regimes.

<sup>3</sup>Song Doo Ryul was born in Korea and taught at Münster University. He visited North Korea and participated at an academic meeting held in Pyongyang. When he visited South Korea, he was arrested and indicted for violation of the National Security Law.

<sup>4</sup>Christian churches in South Korea have been the stronghold of anti-communism. Recently they became more active in propagating anti-communism after the collapse of Eastern European socialist countries (Kang, 2007). During the occupation of North Korea by the Soviet Army and Korea communist groups represented by Kim Il Sung, most Christian church leaders who escaped from North Korea were anti-communist preachers. They formed the core of Christian leaders in South Korea, representing anti-communist theology. As Christian churches expanded rapidly, churches have played an important role in the reproduction of anti-communism since the 1950s.

<sup>5</sup>Amnesty International (2012: 6) reported the most widely used the National Security Law clause was Article 7 of the NSL.” (1) “Any person who praises, incites or propagates the activities of an antigovernment organization, a member thereof or of the person who has received an order from it, or who acts in concert with it, or propagates or instigates a rebellion against the State, with the knowledge of the fact that it may endanger the existence and security of the State or democratic fundamental order, shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than seven years;”(2) Deleted. <by Act No. 4373, May 31, 1991>;(3) Any person who constitutes or joins an organization aiming at the act as referred to in paragraph (1) shall be punished by imprisonment for a definite term of one or more years;(4) Any person who is a member of the organization as referred to in paragraph (3), and fabricates or circulates any falsies (sic) fact as to the matters which threaten to provoke any confusion of social order, shall be punished by imprisonment for a definite term of two or more years;(5) Any person who manufactures, imports, reproduces, holds, carries, distributes, sells or acquires any documents, drawings or other expression materials, with the intention of committing the act as referred to in paragraph (1), (3) or (4), shall be punished by the penalty as referred to in the respective paragraph;(6) Any person who has attempted the crime as referred to in paragraph (1) or (3) through (5), shall be punished;(7) Any person who prepares for or plots the crime as referred to in paragraph (3) with the intention of committing it shall be punished by imprisonment for not more than five years.”

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