Vol. 7, no. 2 (Fall 2008)

Smart Mobs and Generation X Democracy

Park's Law:
"The more broadband penetration, the less is leadership popularity"

by Youngsook Park

From early May to mid July 2008, the broad avenue near Seoul Plaza in Korea was flooded with candlelight virtually every evening. What started as candlelight vigils by ordinary people who opposed the hastily signed agreement on U.S. beef imports evolved into often violent demonstrations marked by chants demanding that President Lee Myung-bak's administration step down. The largely peaceful candlelight vigils were a reminder of the vibrancy of Korean democracy. In June 1987, ordinary Koreans flocked to the same area in front of City Hall, calling for democracy. Twenty-one years later, Koreans from all walks of life were holding candles to urge the government to renegotiate a beef import agreement which they felt endangered public health.

Déjà vu. It is often said that history has a way of repeating itself. The massive candlelight vigils against the re-importation of U.S. beef reveal a social earthquake rumbling through Korea. The first candlelight gathering on June 13 marked the six-year anniversary of when two Korean schoolgirls were killed after being run over by a U.S. military vehicle. In 2002, that event triggered a tidal wave of national outrage. It is also when candlelight vigils first made their profound presence felt in Korea.

Activists of all sectors were also out in the streets, waving signs bearing anti-government and anti-American messages. In later demonstrations, people hurled stones at riot police, vandalized newspaper headquarters, attacked hotel guests on the streets, and destroyed police buses. The candlelight vigils eventually forced the government to negotiate additional safeguards with the United States and drew an apology from the President. Mr. Lee overhauled his Blue House staff and the Cabinet resigned en masse. The target of all these actions was a government only a little over 100 days old. President Lee, who had been elected in December 2007 by the largest ever winning margin, saw his approval ratings plummet to below 10 percent.

Candlelight demonstrations, which started on 2 May with several thousand demonstrators, drew around three million people to the streets until 12 July, peaking at more than 1 million people on 10 June. The number of demonstrators decreased to about 50,000 on 5 July and finally to about 200-300 on 12 July. The Lee government, which won the election with almost 50% support of voters in December 2007, started losing public support rapidly, and in a _Joongang Daily Newspaper_ poll on 31 May his popularity

dropped to 19.7%. By 5 June, a *Moonhwa Daily Newspaper* poll placed his popularity at 16.9%, and on 6 June it had dropped to 7.4% according to the *Naeil Shinmun (Daily).*

The public support of the previous President Roh Moo-Hyun, who enjoyed overall popularity over 30% from 2003-2005 with broadband penetration of 70-80%, dropped to 11% in November 2006 when the broadband penetration was almost 90%. This was due to his ill management of real estate policies that resulted in sharp land price hikes. When President Lee's popularity plummeted to 7.4% in June 2008, largely as a result of the candlelight demonstrations against his governance, the broadband penetration was 99.2%. Leadership popularity fluctuates but with more broadband penetration, the smarter public will ignore the government policies and the National Assembly's legislations. The political power will become weaker due to active Internet-savvy mobs, and this is a new social revolution. The next Korean presidential elections will take place in 2013, and the Smart Mobs will be more powerful than ever and will weaken political leadership and leaders' popularity. Weaker government will emerge.

BROADBAND PENETRATION AND SMART MOBS

The demonstrations may have their origins in the dynamics of weak government vs. smart individuals and of representative democracy vs. participatory democracy. Even in the 1980s, Jerome Glenn foresaw that Korea will be the country to test the predictions involving Smart Mob activities and the decline of nation-state power relative to individual power in the 21st century, as discussed in his book *Future Mind*.

The more powerful "Smart Mobs" are defeating the new administration in Korea. Park Youngsook's Law says the more broadband penetration, the less is leadership popularity. As noted by a few journals in Korea, when the broadband penetration went up to 90% during the previous administration, the leadership popularity and trust dropped below 20%. Recent events corroborate this law. However, this time the new government was only 100 days old and had a leadership popularity of less than 10%, while broadband penetration had increased to 99%. In a survey conducted by the *Naeil Shinmun* (*Tomorrow Daily)* in cooperation with the Hangil Research Institute, the current President's popularity on June 6, 2008 went all the way down to 7.4% (12.1% with the "so so" repliers included).

South Korea's broadband network is the most developed in the world, a rank indicated in May 2008 by the international Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF). The rank takes the penetration rate of broadband connectivity, the average connection speed, and the prices into account. South Korea's broadband is the most developed, with a score of 15.92. Its home broadband penetration rate is 93 percent, and the average speed rate is 49.5 Mbps. Japan ranks second and Finland third. The United States ranks only 15th, with a home broadband penetration rate of 57 percent and an average speed rate of 4.9 Mbps. China's overall Internet penetration rate is 16 percent, still below the global average of 19.1 percent.

However, in September 2008, South Korea became the only country that had completed a nationwide information superhighway infrastructure. It is first in the world in per capita Very High Speed Digital Subscriber Line users and is one of the global frontrunners in the information age. People spent 30.4 minutes per day online in 1998, but that figure almost tripled to 90.7 minutes by 2006. 75% of people have been using the Internet in 2008, and more than 30 million Koreans access the Internet everyday. South Korea is a leading country of the information technology revolution. In Korea, per capita mobile phone and Internet use is the highest in East Asia outside of city states like Singapore and Hong Kong.

It is very interesting to know what will happen in 5 years when the full-scale, high-powered mobile computing social networks are fully deployed in Korea. Park's Law of the more broadband penetration, the less leadership popularity may still apply.

Smart Mobs: The Next Social Revolution is a book by Howard Rheingold that deals with the social, economic and political changes implicated by developing technology. The book covers subjects from text-messaging culture to wireless Internet developments to the impact of the Web on the marketplace, according to the Wikipedia definition. The Smart Mobs consider themselves to be smart and powerful so that they do not respect authorities, and Generation X will not acknowledge decisions taken by the National Assembly nor by the government.

Korean protesters against the import of U.S. beef are Smart Mobs on steroids. The recent emergence of technology-enabled collective action in Korea has been spotted by the blogosphere: Agora Daum Web portal site. Tecnhnokimchi reports on the emergence of citizen journalism, and OhMyNews writes about how its readers spontaneously provide a 'long tail' of funding in exchange for citizen media. Smart Mobs have overturned the entrenched power of the old and conservative media such as *Chosun Ilbo (Daily Newspaper)*, *Joongang Ilbo,* and *Donga Ilbo*.

NATION-STATES – ECLIPSED?

Democracy in the Turmoil of the Future by Jyrki Katainen, Chair of the Committee for the Future, and Mika Mannermaa, published in 2007, explains the declining role of nation-states. The EU has already restricted the state independent legislation and policies in terms of commercial policy, regional policy, taxation, etc. The sovereignty of nation-states is shrinking, reduced by the growth in power of market forces. Turnouts at elections have been declining. Citizens are less interested in being active members of political parties than they are in the ballot box. Up to 2017, demographic change will maintain the basic structure of the political party map, but after 2017, Generation X will create their own culture of influence, and they will not acknowledge decisions taken by the parliament but rather will create their own reality of influence with a mastery of technology and the dynamics of the economy. Influence outside of representative government will increase in different ways. Civil society organisations, the Internet, e-mail and mobile phones and virtual network power will increase. A democracy of minorities will emerge. The political parties of today have not "always" been around, nor will they always be. They will wither and die over the decades.

Future Mind, written by Jerome Glenn in the late 1980's, predicts the decline of government power. He said, "Although the nation-states will become more effective, other centers of power will grow faster. This will leave the nation-states less powerful in the 21st century relative to the growth of corporate, media, and individual power. Just as royalty is still a factor in the United Kingdom but lost power relative to the growth in parliamentary democracy, so too, nation-states will remain, but their autonomy will continue to erode. As a result, nation-states may have to accept new institutional arrangements to stay in power. Otherwise, they may become withering artifacts of autonomous power, much like what happened in England. Since corporations can move faster than governments and are not bound by geography, it is only a matter of time until they eclipse government power."

DECISION MAKING IMPLICATIONS

Therefore, in order to persuade the Smart Mobs, the government has to apply a whole new operating system to national affairs. The world is moving toward ubiquitous computing with collective intelligence for just-in-time knowledge to inform decisions. Vast peer-reviewed data banks are being interconnected so that composites of data from many sources can present the best facts available for a

given decision. At one time, decision making often reflected the judgment of individuals or very small groups, but now decision making benefits from the increasing use of open systems that invite broad and transparent participation of groups of experts and individuals from around the world. Ubiquitous computing will increase the number of decisions per day, constantly changing schedules and priorities. Open systems, democratization, and interactive media are involving more people in decision making.

Decision making will be increasingly augmented by the integration of ubiquitous sensors, a more intelligent Web, and institutional and personal intelligence software that helps us receive and respond to feedback for improving decisions. Such future capacities might help identify attractors of responsible decision making and network them for improved decisions. One new example is the Real Time Delphi that provides decision makers with rapid access to an ongoing synthesis of experts' judgments enabling rapid response to feedback.

The Korean government has to create the Real Time Delphi system to collect public opinions. Self-organization of volunteers around the world via Web sites, both progressives and conservatives, is another new strategy to increase transparency and expand participation in decision processes. In Korea all the popular Web sites are now progressive, and therefore, more conservative Web portals may be a solution to hear from the silent majority. It is also possible that more Smart Mobs behavior experts will be trained to cope with the challenges and that police and other government agencies will learn how to persuade the public to reason the government's new policies. To deal with Smart Mobs' activities, the government will need to identify future trends for Smart Mobs.

Youngsook Park has written an article about the recent Korean smart mob activities and direct democracy. In addition, she published articles about Park's Law in a few Korean journals. She is currently a senior adviser at the Australian Embassy Seoul, Chair of UN Future Forum (Millennium Project Korea Node of WFUNA), and Chair of World Future Society Korea. In addition, she is a founder and president of the Korean Foster Care Association which looks after some 4000 abandoned children.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

o *Park discusses how a Smart Mob can be influential or even decisive in the domestic politics of democracies. Within the next decade, to what extent will a Smart Mob be able to exert similar influence elsewhere – for example, against a corporation, a media outlet, or a foreign government?*

o *Anyone who has access to the Internet is a potential member of a Smart Mob and of the "fourth estate" (the press). However, considering the proliferation of information (and the propensity of some people to "feast" only on information that is consistent with their viewpoints), to what extent will individual Smart Mob participants be influential?*

o *Sources of identity are many – for example, one's community, nation, ethnicity, tribe or family, socioeconomic group, profession, religion, political affiliation or position, university, or sports team. Today, some people identify with larger groups, others identify with smaller groups, and still others experience a general sense of alienation. For its part, the role of the nation-state is declining, as Park and several other authors have noted. In what ways will the advent of the Smart Mob influence people's senses of identity in your part of the world?*

o *What are the implications of the IT-enabled Smart Mob to a government's capability to plan long-range, give a selected course of action a fair chance to succeed, and manage expectations? Are these implications different in parliamentary democracies (that can be*

toppled by a vote of no confidence) than in other types of democracies (for example, the U.S. system)?

o *Park notes that turnout in elections is declining. This is also true elsewhere, including in the U.S. Several reasons have been proposed for this – for example, that fundamental issues important to voters are not addressed, or that voters have other avenues of political participation such as Smart Mobs or (in the US) political action committees (PACs). It has even been suggested that apparent voter apathy is characteristic of a mature democracy. Characterize the political process in your part of the world in 2018, considering (a) the level and means of participation by the general public, (b) the relative power of the branches and levels of government, and (c) the types of political organizations that will be influential at that time.*

o *What are the countertrends to increasing corporate power (at the expense of nation-states), if any?*

o *Park states that "Ubiquitous computing will increase the number of decisions per day, constantly changing schedules and priorities." What are the implications to the workforce of tomorrow in your part of the world and elsewhere? Related question – will decision-making become too data dependent, with a corresponding decline in the role of intuition and judgment, as some have argued? Conversely, will computers take over many "left-brain" (deductive, analytical) functions, leading to a possible resurgence of a "right-brain" (intuitive, subjective) working culture, as others have suggested?*