Right-Wing Nationalism and the National United Front in Post-liberation South Korea

DIFFICULTY IN THE EVALUATION OF POLITICAL FIGURES IN THE IMMEDIATE POST-LIBERATION ERA

After the liberation of Korea in August 1945, political parties and political organizations mushroomed in South Korea. It is, however, difficult to analyse the character of either these organizations or the political figures active during this period. Political parties of both leftist and rightist persuasions equally articulated national and social agendas for the post-liberation era. During this period, political parties were not polarized along ideological lines, but comprised people of diverse political views who had coalesced under a certain umbrella out of respect for the political leaders associated with it. This explains why the character of political parties, organizations and leaders was so amorphous and vague.

In the post-liberation era, political figures used terms and concepts such as bourgeois democratic revolution, democracy, nationalism, national united front and people's democracy either in an abstract way or in ways that suited them. Furthermore, political leaders and organizations during this period were virulent in their attacks on their adversaries, and in so doing they were not so much motivated by ideological divergence as consideration of personal loss or gain. It is also remarkable that they did not hesitate in whitewashing their own blots or justifying themselves in the most blatant way. Under these circumstances, anti-democratic forces reinvented themselves as democratic forces and anti-nationalist forces often projected themselves as intensely nationalistic forces.

The second section of this chapter, therefore, covers the scope of right-wing nationalism and the notion of nationalism and the National United Front. In the third section, I will discuss the question as to the ways in which right-wing nationalist parties and organizations changed in three distinct phases: the period of Left-Right conflict (September 1945 to May 1946), the
period of the movement for Left-Right coalition (May 1946 to December 1946) and the period of the centralist line (January 1947 to May 1948). In the fourth section, I attempt to understand the trajectory of right-wing nationalism, focusing on such salient issues as the logic of participation in Left-Right coalition and attitudes towards progressive reforms, as well as towards the issue of pro-Japanese collaborators. The conclusion seeks to provide a critical assessment of right-wing nationalism and the National United Front.

In this chapter, I have laid special emphasis on the fact that the character of both the left wing and the right wing changed considerably when they participated in the Left-Right coalition. When right-wing nationalists did not join the coalition, they were at best half-hearted in their response to such burning issues of the times as land reform and the punishment of pro-Japanese collaborators. However, they were extremely enthusiastic in their response to these issues during the period of their participation in the Left-Right coalition. This chapter discusses the point in detail. Left-Right coalition requires flexibility, the spirit of compromise and the attitude of co-existence and symbiosis. It is said that the Korean people lack those characteristics. It is apparent that the attitude and spirit of coalition is too important to be overemphasized.

PROBLEM OF THE SCOPE AND NOTION OF RIGHT-WING NATIONALISM

Before discussing the scope of the concept of right-wing nationalism, it seems necessary to clarify that even left-wing political parties and organizations included many leaders who were indeed as conservative as those in the right wing. There is a danger in drawing a demarcation line between Left and Right abstractly and arbitrarily on the basis of the degree of progressive character, because a section of right-wing individuals within the People's Party, the New People's Party, and the Working People's Party were as conservative as right-wing nationalists. Furthermore, in the post-liberation era, the ideological orientation of political leaders in South Korea was subject to varying degrees of fluctuation. As noted earlier, people did not join left or right-wing organizations on the basis of their compatibility with their own views or their class-character. If we examine the social standing or career of political leaders in the left-wing parties in the post-liberation era, we are struck by the fact that many of them were advocates of right-wing ideology during the colonial period. The opposite is also true. For example, a leader who once held top-ranking positions in the Korean Democratic Party changed sides to become Vice-President of the New People's Party. One may also cite the example of Jeong No-Sik, who became a cadre of the South Korean Workers' Party, or of Heo Heon, the committee chairman of the South Korean Worker's Party whom the Korean Democratic Party sought to woo in the post-liberation era. It seems doubtful that Heo Heon belonged to any left-wing organizations during the Japanese colonial period. It is obvious that it is not easy to make a clear distinction between the Left and Right Wings in the immediate post-liberation era. Right-wing nationalist leaders discussed in this chapter refer