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Investigate how protest movements have adapted to the digital age. Consider how online activism complements or challenges traditional forms of demonstration.

APAC

Divisive Effects of Social Media on Collective Actions in South Korea

Over the past three months, political turmoil in South Korea caused by President Yoon's emergency martial law declaration sparked heated political debate regarding his impeachment. As a photographer paying attention to what would eventually be a historical moment, I was eager to document the scene through my camera. I headed to Hannam-dong, the most visible epicenter regarding Yoon's impeachment. Yet, what I saw was ironic. Claims made for or against impeachment were tangential at best. Contrary to political idealism taught in school, the protest scene was nothing more than a menagerie of logical fallacies, from circular logic defending democracy for the sake of securing democracy to slanderous claims labeling progressive party leaders as subversive communists. Then, where is the idealistic political discourse? I could easily find the source on social media where such narratives are created and reproduced. The rapid and individualized nature of information consumption made possible through social media, has effaced the deliberation and persuasion necessary in the formation of public opinion, whereby individual political opinions are more easily shaped by skewed and limited information reinforced and reproduced by algorithms.

According to a 2023 National Assembly Research Service (NARS) study, nearly 87 percent of political YouTube videos are dominated by opinion-based or incendiary commentary, demonstrating how easy it is to become intellectually self-sufficient to develop their political convictions. Instead, their algorithm serves as an around-the-clock guide, feeding them content that articulates a supposedly coherent take on current events. This instant access to like-minded content might seem empowering, especially given South Korea's surging voting participation from around 52% to 67% between the 2012 and 2024 National Assembly elections. Yet, a 2023 Gallup Korea survey indicates a decline in traditional organizational affiliations among young adults: 60 percent of respondents in their 20s and 30s report no loyalty to any political party, labor union, or religious group – up from 40 percent just a decade earlier. In other words, people no longer rely on older forms of collective mobilization; they can effectively form political identities online. While such a personalized approach may motivate individual acts of protest, it omits the process of coordination and compromise. While protesters in recent generations might easily feel greater conviction, the result turns out that they are also more disconnected, fostering the social fragmentation one can sense on the streets and online. Meanwhile, the 2022 presidential race, decided by just 0.73 percentage points, reflects profound polarization. Party competition draws massive turnout, but it also cements ideological divides.

In the end, where traditional group identities once founded collective activism, a new hyper-individualized form of political participation based on identity politics in this digital age has rushed in to fill the gap. This individualization in collective action is amplified by social media, which, while it can spark momentary surges of online support, struggles to maintain long-term movements. Ultimately, the digital age has undermined the tangible success of protests by replacing group solidarity with fragmented segments of individual conviction, resulting in a lack of sustained unity and impact.

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