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SOUTH KOREAN CONSERVATIVE PRESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZED LABOR AND LABOR ISSUES: Analysis of presidential speeches of Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol in regard to labor, unions, and related issues.

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SOUTH KOREAN CONSERVATIVE PRESIDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON ORGANIZED LABOR AND LABOR ISSUES

Analysis of presidential speeches of Lee Myung-bak,
Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol in regard to labor, unions,
and related issues.

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INTRODUCTION

South Korea (hereafter Korea) is known for its massive economic growth after the Korean War, a growth so remarkable it became known as "the Miracle on the Han River."¹ This economic growth was possible through the Park Chung-hee government's (1961-1979) strategy of price-competitive, export-oriented industrialization in the 1960s. In order to be competitive in pricing, there was a need for cheap labor, which was made possible through wage suppression and strict control of labor unions. North Korea's existence was used as a justification for this control, as anyone who spoke up against the South Korean authoritarian government's actions was deemed to be "guided by dangerous and seditious communist forces."² Laws were amended to restrict the organization and bargaining power of unions. While this kind of labor control ensured that the Korean economy grew exponentially over time, the Korean workers that made it happen suffered. They worked the longest hours in the world while receiving little-to-no wage increases.³ It was under this labor repression that Korea built up its economy to current levels.

On the other side of this equation are the labor movements. Korean labor movements have their origins in the 1920s, where under the Japanese colonial regime labor conflicts arose. Korean workers, at that time, were considered secondary citizens in their own country, having no protection under any labor law and earning on average less than half of what a Japanese laborer would earn for the same work.⁴ Labor issues that arose were managed by the state through the mobilization of colonial police and the military. As exemplified by the creation of the radical anti-Japanese and anti-capitalist Chosŏn General Federation of Labor, labor movements were closely associated and evolved with nationalist, socialist, and anti-imperialist movements for independence.⁵ After the capitulation of Japan and the emergence of the US as the controlling power in Korea, trade unions were allowed to legally exist at first. However, the US eventually began to see the socialist left-wing unions as a threat to its hegemony in East-Asia and prohibited them.⁶ The Korean War then, through the destruction and disruption of social life, dissolved all previously established labor organizations.

¹ The phrase derives from the German "Miracle on the Rhein," the post-war economic growth of West-Germany that was admired by Korean politicians in the 1960s.

² Soon-Mee Kwon and Ijin Hong, "Is South Korea as Leftist as It Gets? Labour Market Policy Reforms under the Moon Presidency," *The Political Quarterly* 90, no. 1 (2019): 81-82.

³ Eun Mee Kim and Nancy Y. Kim, "Chaebŏl and the Political Economy of South Korean Development, 1945–present," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*, ed. Sojin Lim and Niki J.P. Alsford (New York: Routledge, 2022), 105.

⁴ Dae-oup Chang, "Korean Labour Movement: the Birth, Rise and Transformation of the Democratic Trade Union Movement," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*, edited by Sojin Lim and Niki J.P. Alsford (New York: Routledge, 2022), 160.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

Later, while under the Park Chung-hee regime, as mentioned above, where labor suppression was the norm, a new labor movement materialized within the textile industry, which was dominated by women.⁷ These women tried to establish independent unions fighting against the state and other male-dominated unions, such as the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), but were sabotaged by them. The women's labor movement was involved in a 1979 strike, which was repressed by the police and resulted in the killing of a young female worker. This became the catalyst for the riots in Masan and Busan. Park was then killed by a close associate, Kim Jae-hyu, because according to Kim, he wanted to prevent Park from inflicting a bloodbath upon the cities.⁸ This meant the fall of the Park regime. The number of strikes grew, and although violently suppressed by the Chun Doo-hwan government (1979-1988), the labor movement grew and became intertwined with the democratization movement. Although the explicit labor repression by the state ended in the period of democratization, labor exploitation continued through state-backed flexibilization and other similar labor policies.⁹ The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the changes that came forth out of the IMF and Korea's response ushered in an era of flexible and irregular work, which is discussed in detail in the literature review section below. This increasing irregular work destabilized organized labor, as the growing differences between regular and irregular workers made it more difficult for workers to organize themselves as one united front. After 1997, the government focused foremostly on the flexibilization of the labor market and principally relinquished their active and violent labor repression, but, in cases where they deemed it necessary, they still resorted to violent methods.¹⁰ A new strategy of giving the business side the means to legally disorganize labor was created where labor disputes became increasingly branded as illegal, and the individual worker could be legally punished for collective actions.¹¹ Although the manner of engagement between organized labor and the government has changed greatly since the last century, its new relationship is still one of apprehension, contention, and hostility.

This thesis will answer the following question: how does the rhetoric in regard to labor issues in speeches of three conservative Korean presidents – Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol – differ? This thesis argues that the background of the respective presidents weighs heavily on their rhetoric and policies. In order to do so, this thesis will be structured in

⁷ Ibid., 161-162.

⁸ Ibid., 162.

⁹ Kim and Kim, "Chaebŏl and the Political Economy of South Korean Development, 1945– present," 109.

¹⁰ Dae-oup Chang and Jun-Ho Chae, "The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 34, no.4 (2004): 438.

¹¹ Jamie Doucette and Susan Kang, "Legal Geographies of Labour and Postdemocracy: Reinforcing Non-Standard Work in South Korea," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 43 no.2 (2018): 206.

the following way. It will start with a literature review on the post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis labor relations in order to comprehend the state of labor from the 2000s onwards. This will be followed by a short deep dive into labor's relation with party politics in Korea. In order to understand how conservative voices discuss and approach labor, this thesis will analyze the speeches of the former conservative presidents Lee Myung-bak (2008-2013) and Park Geun-hye (2013-2017) and the current conservative president Yoon Suk-yeol (2022- now). The analysis of their speeches will clarify how presidents with the same conservative views use different rationale and rhetoric in their discourse on labor issues. Lastly, there will be a discussion section on their three perspectives.

The respective presidents, despite their shared conservative views, all have different backgrounds. First, Lee Myung-bak is known for his rags-to-riches success story. His family came back from Japan to Korea after the Japanese capitulation and lived in poverty. He was able to climb the corporate ladder from blue-collar worker to the youngest CEO at one of *chaebol* Hyundai's affiliates.¹² In the 1990s, he turned to politics and eventually became the mayor of Seoul in 2002. His presidency was seen as a marker of democratic consolidation, as the win of his conservative party demonstrated that Korea could have two political turnovers.¹³ Secondly, Park Geun-hye is the daughter of the aforementioned Park Chung-hee. She earned the nickname "Queen of Elections" when she was able to win 40 re-elections and byelections as chairperson of the conservative party, the Grand National Party.¹⁴ She lost the presidency in 2007 to Lee but was able to become the first female president in 2013 with the renamed party, Saenuri, which targeted left-leaning causes during the election period. Her presidency came to an end in 2017 when she was impeached for corruption. Lastly, Yoon Suk-yeol was a renowned prosecutor that helped with the indictment of both Lee and Park in 2017. He was also involved with cases that were in connection to the *chaebol* Samsung, a former chief justice, and former National Intelligence Service (NIS) chiefs. He joined the right-wing People Power Party in 2021 and ran for president in 2022 on the promises of abolishing the Ministry of Gender Equality and Family and promoting economic deregulation.

¹² *Chaebol* refers to Korean industrial conglomerates.

¹³ Youngmi Kim, "Evolution of Political Parties and the Party System in South Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*, edited by Sojin Lim and Niki J.P. Alford (New York: Routledge, 2022), 75.

¹⁴ Jae-jin Yang, *The Political Economy of the Small Welfare State in South Korea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 197.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this thesis is as follows: this thesis makes use of a close reading of primary sources, which are various speeches of former president Lee Myung-bak, former president Park Geun-hye, and current president Yoon Suk-yeol. Transcripts of the speeches were obtained from the Presidential Archives of the Ministry of the Interior and Safety (Lee and Park)¹⁵ and from the Republic of Korea Policy Briefing site (Yoon).¹⁶ The speeches are analyzed through close reading, and relevant excerpts are brought forward for analysis. The analysis of the primary sources is supported by the discourse analysis of secondary sources, consisting of academic articles, books, and relevant newspaper articles.

The speeches analyzed in this thesis were selected using the following keywords: 노동운동 (labor movement), 노조/노동조합 (labor union), 노동개혁 (labor reform), 노총 ((con)federation of labor unions), 한국노총/한국노동조합총연맹 (Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU)), 노사정 (labor, management, and government), and 비정규직 (irregular worker). The author broadened her search according to the new terms that arose while analyzing the respective speeches. Each president has a distinct vocabulary when speaking about labor, which leads to a variety of different terms used in the speeches.

There were 79 total speeches used, with the following distribution: 30 speeches by Lee Myung-bak (38%), 26 speeches by Park Geun-hye (33%), and 23 speeches by Yoon Suk-yeol (29%). The analyses of the presidents are of different lengths. There are two reasons for this. First, Park had a shorter term due to her impeachment, and Yoon is still in the middle of his term as of this writing. The cut-off date for speeches of Yoon selected to be analyzed is the 10th of April, 2024, as this designates the two-year mark of his presidency. Secondly, the presidents have different styles of oration. Lee gave, in comparison to the others, many speeches and even utilized radio as a medium. He also appeared to enjoy giving personal anecdotes; considering that he came from a poor, working class background, this facet of him came forward advantageously in his speeches that were related to labor issues. Park and Yoon, on the other hand, did not share this enthusiasm for elaborate speeches. Park was branded with the label

¹⁵ “연설기록 (Speech Archive),” 행정안전부 대통령기록관 (Presidential Archives of the Ministry of Public Administration and Security), 기록컬렉션 (Archival Collection), <https://www.pa.go.kr/research/contents/speech/index.jsp>.

¹⁶ “연설문 (Transcribed Speeches),” 대한민국 정책브리핑 (Republic of Korea Policy Briefing), 브리핑룸 (Briefing Room), <https://www.korea.kr/briefing/speechList.do>.

“불통,” meaning “no communication” during her presidency because of the absence of clear and unrestricted communication.¹⁷ An example of this is that many of her interviews and press conferences were scripted. Yoon, too, has been criticized for his lack of communication, with it being cited as the reason for his low approval rating.¹⁸ His non-political background as a prosecutor could explain his lack of communication.

¹⁷ 권혁남 (Hyuk-nam Kwon), “대통령 기자회견 (Presidential Press Conferences),” *전북일보 (Jeonbuk Ilbo)*, January 12, 2015. <http://www.jjan.kr/article/20150111535854>.

¹⁸ “Yoon's approval rating sinks to lowest point since taking office,” *The Korea Times*, Last modified June 1, 2024, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2024/06/356_375749.html.

LITERATURE REVIEW: POST-1997 ASIAN FINANCIAL CRISIS LABOR RELATIONS

The 1997 Asian Financial Crisis brought many changes to Korea. As for labor relations, they were characterized by layoffs and changes in working circumstances, such as increased flexible labor, irregular work, and work insecurity. The literature on Korean labor relations since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis demonstrates three key actors: the various labor unions, big businesses, and the state. Although labor plays a central role in the economy, the workers themselves lack agency in regard to their own situation.

The first relevant actor is that of labor unions. Before the democratization in 1987, labor unions were not recognized by the government, and labor repression was considered the norm in order to achieve record economic growth. Labor unions already had a confrontational past with the past authoritarian government.¹⁹ This contentious relationship continued after democratization. Between 1996 and 1998, several labor bills were written and revised that gave, on the one hand, the labor unions more rights and recognition; on the other hand, however, the unions were also forced to concede to increased layoffs and flexible labor in return.²⁰ Tat Yan Kong argues that the lack of policy influence and the lack of dialogue between unions and party politics made it impossible for unions to hold on to basic union rights.²¹ Several authors agree that the existence and increase of irregular workers and their consequent unfavorable relationship with their regular colleagues is harmful to unions, as it undermines the unions' power and increases competition and hostility amongst workers, not only in the labor market, but also on the work floor.²² In their 2004 article, Dae-oup Chang and Jun-ho Chae are relatively positive about the future of irregular workers as they see a rise in unions for irregular workers and also solidarity strikes of regular workers.²³ In 2015, Yoonkyung Lee notes that the opposite has transpired. She argues that irregular workers, especially women, not only have to deal with "lower wages, greater job insecurity, and lack of social safety protection," but are also "deprived of the basic organizational representation to raise their socioeconomic grievances."²⁴

¹⁹ Chang and Chae, "The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997," 434.

²⁰ Yoonkyung Lee, "Labor after Neoliberalism: The Birth of the Insecure Class in South Korea," *Globalizations* 12, no.2 (2016) 187.

²¹ Tat Yan Kong, "Between Late-Industrialisation and Globalisation: The Hybridisation of Labour Relations among Leading South Korean Firms," *New Political Economy* 18, no. 5 (2013): 632.

²² Chang and Chae, "The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997," 437, 443; Andrew Eungi Kim and Innwon Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea: The Rapid Growth of Underemployment and Job Insecurity," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 3 (May/June 2006): 456; Lee, "Labor after Neoliberalism," 197.

²³ Chang and Chae, "The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997," 443, 445.

²⁴ Lee, "Labor after Neoliberalism," 197.

Big business has always had a contentious relationship with labor. As labor was one of the essential cogs in the record economic growth machine of the government, labor was both essential and subjugated to the will and whims of the big businesses. The leaders and winners of this economic success were the *chaebol*, Korean conglomerates that operated under the direction of the government. As powerhouses of the Korean economy, they are examples of success and often are emulated by other companies. Their current relationship with labor and labor unions is contentious. Samsung, for example, has rejected (independent) labor unions on the whole and adheres to “union-free management,” which, according to Kong, shows their “impunity from democratic political accountability.”²⁵ Other big businesses that do have unions use the presence of irregular employment to avoid the responsibilities that direct employers have.²⁶ In his case study on the Hyundai plant in Ulsan, Jong-Woon Lee demonstrates that although the irregular employment through contractors has the pretense of independent companies working under Hyundai, Hyundai (and, surprisingly enough, partially the trade union) is actually in charge of the management of the irregular workforce.²⁷ Outside of their own domains of control, big businesses also actively interfere with politics, as they compel politicians to write laws and regulations in their favor, such as those on layoffs and irregular employment, and actively protest the growth of social protection.²⁸

The government's relation towards labor can be categorized into two types: their active stance against labor (unions) and in favor of big business, and their passivity in regard to the social protection of the workers. Chang and Chae note that the government interferes greatly in labor relations, not only deeming strikes related to structural adjustment illegal, but also using violence in labor disputes in order to advance the deregulation of the labor market.²⁹ This is beneficial for the big businesses that prefer irregular employment. Their active cooperation with big businesses is due to the catch-22 dilemma that both politicians and citizens face, as both the nation and its economy rely on these big businesses in order to thrive and grow.³⁰ This, in turn, gives these businesses a lot of power and influence, which makes it hard to go against their wishes. Despite these active measures for the deregulation of the labor market, there has been a passivity in regard to the social protection of the workers affected. Irregular work is not regulated by legislation, and collective bargaining between irregular workers and the firm they

²⁵ Kong, “Between Late-Industrialisation and Globalisation,” 637-638.

²⁶ Chang and Chae, “The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997,” 436.

²⁷ Jong-Woon Lee, “Labour Contracting and Changing Employment Relationships in South Korea,” *Development Policy Review* 32, no. 4 (2014): 460-461, 469.

²⁸ Lee, “Labor after Neoliberalism,” 196.

²⁹ Chang and Chae, “The Transformation of Korean Labour Relations since 1997,” 438-439.

³⁰ Lee, “Labor after Neoliberalism,” 186, 195.

work under is not recognized at the national level.³¹ Yoonkyung Lee points to the slowness, ineptitude, and lack of representation of party politics as a key to the fate of labor and criticizes the political elite for failing to represent the working people, to act as a mediator when labor unions and big businesses dispute about labor flexibility, and to make appropriate policy interventions that favor the working people.³² In their 2006 article, Andrew Eungi Kim and Innwon Park propose relevant solutions to the problems of flexible labor hitherto. They urge the government to secure the rights of irregular workers and to curtail the use of irregular employment when that kind of employment is not necessary.³³

All in all, most of the consequences that came forth from the flexibilization after the 1997 Crisis were negative. Not only has hidden poverty, the phenomenon where people that work full time still cannot get by, increased, but it is argued that a new insecure underclass has been created, composed of low-income, self-employed, and irregular workers.³⁴ The change towards irregular employment has also reduced the amount of new regular employees that start at companies. Those that did survive the changes during the past decades have had to face negative consequences as well. After layoffs, not only were they faced with "survivors guilt," an increased workload, a sense of competition between colleagues, and job insecurity, but they also no longer had the guarantee that hard work pays off.³⁵ Many companies opt to either hire irregular workers or workers that already have the needed experience, which causes increased unemployment for younger, inexperienced workers and less opportunity to grow and gain experience.³⁶ Kim and Park warn that these kinds of work circumstances could lead to a "flexible low wage economy," where there is a vicious cycle of low skill, low productivity, low wages, and so on.³⁷ Jong-Woon Lee similarly warns about this in his case study on Hyundai. He argues that the declining use of regular workers can reduce the quality of Hyundai's products and eventually its overall business performance.³⁸ Post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis labor relations are thus characterized by a worsening of labor rights and an increase of work insecurity.

³¹ Lee, "Labour Contracting and Changing Employment Relationships in South Korea," 455.

³² Lee, "Labor after Neoliberalism," 195, 198.

³³ Kim and Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea," 456.

³⁴ Kim and Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea," 452; Lee, "Labor after Neoliberalism," 185, 188.

³⁵ Kim and Park, "Changing Trends of Work in South Korea," 449-450.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 442, 444.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 455.

³⁸ Lee, "Labour Contracting and Changing Employment Relationships in South Korea," 470.

PARTY POLITICS AND LABOR IN KOREA

In order to interpret the relation between the presidents and labor, an understanding of how labor has coexisted with politics is needed. Labor's place in politics in Korea has always been a difficult issue. The Korean authoritarian state and its labor repression inadvertently created one of Asia's most militant labor movements, where labor conflict is not unusual and workers are very skeptical of management.³⁹ Although there are parties that concern themselves with labor issues and they have some symbolic political influence, they tend to be small and relatively weak.⁴⁰ These parties were often hindered by multiple issues. Not only were leftist parties repressed and painted as communist by the authoritarian government, but, due to government interference and economic strategies, unions are not based on industries but rather on companies making it harder to create national alliances.⁴¹ On the other side, as the scholar Matthew Wong claims, established parties are often too preoccupied with internal party politics to consider working with unions.⁴² The right-wing parties, on the other hand, came forth out of the authoritarian era and thus have plenty of connections with old networks, which means that they, through the use of quid-pro-quo, still have access to the particularistic benefits that attract voters.⁴³

Of course, the impact of the fervent anti-communism rhetoric of the authoritarian government must not be underestimated in influencing people even after democratization. During the authoritarian era, it was illegal to establish a communist, socialist, or any party that had similar ambitions.⁴⁴ Even after democratization, parties were still restricted in matters concerning leftist issues because of the severe anti-communism rhetoric that was normalized in the decades before: it was common to see anti-communist propaganda till the late 1990s.⁴⁵ Being branded as a communist, even without basis, was often followed by serious repercussions, from torture to life sentences.⁴⁶ However, being labeled as communist was an easy feat to

³⁹ Kim and Kim, "Chaebŏl and the Political Economy of South Korean Development, 1945– present," 108; Mathew Y. H. Wong, "Comparing Minimum Wage Policies in East Asia: Political Competition and Labor Incorporation," *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis: Research and Practice*, 25, no.2 (2023): 202.

⁴⁰ Yoonkyung Lee, "Labor's Political Representation: Divergent Paths in Korea and Taiwan," in *Working through the Past: Labor and Authoritarian Legacies in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Teri L. Caraway, Maria Lorena Cook, and Stephen Crowley (New York: Cornell University Press, 2015), 49.

⁴¹ Willy Jou, "How do Citizens in East Asian Democracies Understand Left and Right?" *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 12, no.1 (2011): 40-41.

⁴² Wong, "Comparing Minimum Wage Policies in East Asia," 203.

⁴³ Jaemin Shim, "Left is Right and Right is Left? Partisan Difference on Social Welfare and Particularistic Benefits in Japan, South Korea and Taiwan," *Journal of International and Comparative Social Policy* 36, no.1 (2020): 29-30.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴⁵ Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation in South Korea*. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2011), 73.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

achieve as there was no distinction between “real communists” and socialists, those who are pro-labor, or those who did not agree with the authoritarian government or the US.⁴⁷ Activists also made use of this anti-communism framework, either because they truly believed it or because they knew the rules of the game, using anti-communism slogans during demonstrations of the 1970s and 1980s: one labor activist after protesting even claimed that “a democratic labor movement was the best way to counter communism.”⁴⁸ Even now, leftism is still considered a taboo, exemplified by how one can call others right-wing without any problem, but use of the label of left-wing is immediately connected to communism and socially not done.⁴⁹

This anti-communism rhetoric has led to a political system that focused on regionalism, rather than the right-left spectrum.⁵⁰ The difference between regions was most felt in Kyeongsang and Jeolla, as the former benefited the most during the pre-democracy era and the latter was impeded on the most. The reason why Jeolla is disadvantaged, or lagging behind as Lee Myung-bak called it in one of his speeches,⁵¹ goes far back. In 1948, there was the Jeju Uprising, where people of Jeju Island protested against the elections to be held in the American occupied part of Korea, as they feared that this would finalize the division of Korea into two countries. The police and paramilitary groups that were under the leadership of the Americans severely suppressed the Jeju people, resulting in more than ten percent of the population being killed. Regiments stationed in the cities Yeosu and Suncheon, located in the Jeolla region, rebelled and refused to cooperate with this suppression, leading to them facing mass executions, indiscriminate detention in concentration camps, and, later, kin punishment, where family members of the rebels were shunned from employment and social activities.⁵² The aftereffect of this was that the Jeolla region was not able to progress as much as other regions have. The fact that political parties appeal to this regional disparity is their way of substituting issues that would normally be on a left-right nexus.

One of the major players in the Korean labor scene is the FKTU. The FKTU was created in 1946 in reaction to leftist unions and it became, through the banning of other unions, the only trade union federation.⁵³ This, according to the scholars Kwon and O’Donnell, indicated the

⁴⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 106.

⁴⁹ The author was explicitly told by multiple Korean instructors not to use 좌파 (left-wing) in a similar way as left-wing in English, as the connotations might offend some.

⁵⁰ Lee, “Labor’s Political Representation,” 50-51.

⁵¹ Myung-bak Lee, “현대중공업 군산조선소 기공식 격려사 (Words of Encouragement at the Hyundai Heavy Industries' Gunsan Shipyard's Groundbreaking Ceremony),” speech, May 7, 2008.

⁵² Lee, *The Making of Minjung*, 79.

⁵³ At that time, it was called the General Federation of Korean Trade Unions (GFKTU).

start of an incorporation of organized labor in the authoritarian state, which “meant that the federation’s functions were limited to supporting the political and the economic interests of the state and Korean capitalism.”⁵⁴ In the 1960s and 1970s, only those who were loyal to the Park Chung-hee regime were allowed to remain; hence, the FKTU began its cooperation with the authoritarian state, as exemplified by its policing of work relations in enterprises and its undermining of the female textile unions as mentioned in the introduction.⁵⁵ It is interesting to note that the cooperation of the FKTU with the authoritarian state has left such a sour taste in the mouths of many unions that, even after democratization in 1987 and legalization of unions in politics in 1997, collaboration with political parties is seen as following the FKTU’s lead and thus frowned upon.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Seung-Ho Kwon and Michael O’Donnell, “Repression and Struggle: the State, the Chaebol and Independent Trade Unions in South Korea,” *The Journal of Industrial Relations* 41, no.2 (1999): 284.

⁵⁵ Chang, “Korean Labour Movement,” 161-162.

⁵⁶ Lee, “Labor’s Political Representation,” 58.

LABOR AND LEE MYUNG-BAK (2008-2013)

This section deals with the first of the three conservative presidents, Lee Myung-bak. As mentioned in the introduction, Lee worked his way up from poverty to become the CEO of one of Hyundai's affiliates. In his speeches, he often gives examples of the hardships his family faced while he grew up, such as how they could not afford to eat three meals a day,⁵⁷ how his mother and sisters had to sell their hair for money,⁵⁸ and how working was never an option for him but a matter of survival.⁵⁹ He also mentions multiple times he can understand the plight of the irregular workers, as he himself was also an irregular employee.⁶⁰ Having this background, in tandem with being a successful businessman, earned him a lot of praise. His speeches remind one of a hardworking man who wants the best for his country. Lee utilized direct styles of communication with the people. He delivered speeches on the radio and he took part in television programs where audience members could ask him questions directly. He has admitted that he does not see himself as a politician and that he entered politics because he wants to improve the country, with his specific goal being that Korea becomes one of the most advanced countries.⁶¹

In regard to labor relations, Lee argues that there should be a new culture of labor and management. He stresses in multiple speeches that the culture of struggles, fights, and opposition needs to be replaced by one of cooperation, collaboration and companionship. He argues that labor-management relations need to go beyond the 1987 system of confrontation and conflict,⁶² and that these kinds of conflicts have decreased in advanced countries: if Korea

⁵⁷ Myung-bak Lee, “제 10 회 세계한인회장대회 축하 (Congratulatory Address at the 10th World Congress of Korean Chairmen),” speech, June 23, 2009.

⁵⁸ Myung-bak Lee, “제 76 차 라디오·인터넷 연설 - 한·미 FTA 로 경제영토가 넓어집니다 (76th Radio and Internet Speech - The Korea-US FTA Expands Economic Territory),” speech, October 17, 2011.

⁵⁹ Myung-bak Lee, “[미국방문] 미 상공회의소 및 한·미 재계회의 공동 주최만찬사 ([US Visit] Joint Dinner of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Korea-U.S. Business Council),” speech, April 17, 2008.

⁶⁰ Myung-bak Lee, “KBS 특집 대통령과의 대화 (KBS Special Feature; A Conversation with the President),” speech, September 9, 2008; Myung-bak Lee, “제 36 차 라디오·인터넷 연설 - 국민의 눈물을 닦아 주는 정부가 되겠습니다 (36th Radio and Internet Speech - We Will Become a Government That Wipes Away the Tears of the People),” speech, March 8, 2010; Myung-bak Lee, “제 18 국회 개원 연설 (18th National Assembly Opening Address),” speech, July 11, 2008.

⁶¹ Lee, “KBS 특집 대통령과의 대화.”

⁶² Myung-bak Lee, “2011 년도 예산안 및 기금운용계획안 제출에 즈음한 시정연설 (Administrative Policy Speech on the Time of Submission of the Budget and Fund Management Plan of 2011),” speech, October 25, 2010.

does not resolve them, it will never become a “first-rate advanced country.”⁶³ This gives the impression that Lee aspires for a peaceful and amiable conduct between both parties.

However, one could also interpret this as a stifling of the voices of dissent, something which Lee, a president who began his term by repressing the protesters that opposed the FTA agreement between Korea and the US, had experience with.⁶⁴ This kind of mellow language in regard to conflicts resurfaces later again. In one of his speeches given in 2011, he recalled a major conflict at SsangYong Motors. He quotes director Park Young-tae on the awkwardness between labor and management and how they resolved it through meetings, workshops, and hiking trips.⁶⁵ Although this sounds like a very gentle and almost endearing way of easing relations between them, it was actually Lee’s violent military-style approach to SsangYong Motors’ workers’ strike in 2009 that created that “awkwardness.” Dozens of workers were detained and hundreds were dismissed in an operation that scholars deem “emblematic of the return of the authoritarian state.”⁶⁶ This specific example is illustrative of Lee’s contrast between his good-spirited rhetoric and his actual actions in regard to organized labor.

In regard to strikes, he praises multiple instances of what he claimed were voluntary suspensions of strikes.⁶⁷ He also emphasizes the negative consequences of strikes; for instance, foreign investors departed from a company after the workers went on strike for higher wages despite already having decent salaries and the fact that the company was losing money.⁶⁸ He also notes the negative impression these “high-income labor union” strikers leave when they go on strike in the middle of an economic crisis⁶⁹ or when they go on strike even though there are workers with lower wages than them.⁷⁰ These instances demonstrate Lee’s disapproval of

⁶³ Myung-bak Lee, “제 17 대 대통령 취임사 (17th Presidential Inaugural Address),” speech, February 25, 2008; Myung-bak Lee, “제 12 회 직업능력의 달 기념사 (Commemorative Speech at the 12th Month of Vocational Competency),” speech, September 5, 2008.

⁶⁴ Chang, “Korean Labour Movement,” 169.

⁶⁵ Myung-bak Lee, “제 66 차 라디오·인터넷 연설 - 협력과 상생의 노사 관계가 절실합니다 (66th Radio and Internet Speech - Cooperation and Mutual Beneficial Labor-Management Relations Are Desperately Needed),” speech, May 30, 2011.

⁶⁶ Chang, “Korean Labour Movement,” 169.

⁶⁷ Myung-bak Lee, “[일본 방문]일본 경제단체 주최 오찬사 ([Japan Visit] Speech at the Luncheon Hosted by a Japanese Economic Organization),” speech, April 21, 2008; Myung-bak Lee, “미·일 순방 관련 기자회견 모두 연설 (Speech at the Press Conference on the US-Japan Visit),” speech, April 13, 2008; Myung-bak Lee, “[미국방문] 워싱턴 동포 간담회 격려사 ([US Visit] Words of Encouragement to Korean residents in Washington),” speech, April 16, 2008.

⁶⁸ Lee, “제 66 차 라디오·인터넷 연설 - 협력과 상생의 노사 관계가 절실합니다 (66th Radio and Internet Speech - Cooperation and Mutual Beneficial Labor-Management Relations Are Desperately Needed).”

⁶⁹ Myung-bak Lee, “제 67 주년 광복절 경축사 (Congratulatory Speech at the 67th National Liberation Day),” speech, August 15, 2012.

⁷⁰ Lee, “제 66 차 라디오·인터넷 연설 - 협력과 상생의 노사 관계가 절실합니다 (66th Radio and Internet Speech - Cooperation and Mutual Beneficial Labor-Management Relations Are Desperately Needed).”

strikes. It is interesting to note that Lee does not appeal to the legality or validity of the strikes themselves, but rather he focuses on the financial consequences and the perception of the public. Negative financial results of strikes are, however, a part of strikes because without those results employers or businesses would not be incentivized to change their arrangements with their employees. Thus, Lee's critique on this intrinsic element of strikes shows that what he wants is something other than a strike, which coincides with his praise of the so-called voluntary suspension of strikes. Furthermore, his focus on the fact that "high-income labor union" workers strike, despite the existence of a crisis or lower wage earners, is telling of a logical fallacy where one cannot express their hardships because there is someone else who has it worse. This makes it that no one has the right to object to their own circumstances because, in theory, there is always someone who has it worse in some way or another.

Lee mentions in several speeches that people question his relation to big businesses. He does not deny being pro-business, mentioning that the first things he did when he became president was to contact business owners and economic organizations and create a hotline for business owners.⁷¹ He does mention that just because he is pro-business, it does not mean that he is pro-*chaebol*, or anti-labor.⁷² One could all too simply mention that Lee appears to be anti-labor and pro-*chaebol* by the fact that multiple people felt the need to ask him and that he had to deny it multiple times. However, looking at his actual conduct towards both parties, it is hard to believe Lee's assertions. The 2008 crisis was a vital change for the way the state conducted their affairs with businesses, as it became again a mutually-beneficial relation, with some scholars even calling it the Second *Chaebol* Republic.⁷³ Because this kind of straightforward relation was frowned upon from the 1980s on, this relation was converted to a more subtle encouragement of the private sector. One of the changes that labor felt because of this was the change from outright violent suppression to the more low-profile flexible labor policies.⁷⁴ Lee's rhetoric alludes to a situation where his support for the businesses does not harm labor, but his actual behavior towards the *chaebol* and labor demonstrates the opposite.

As mentioned in the section on party politics and labor, the FKTU has a complicated historical relation with labor. Lee regards the history of the FKTU in a different light,

⁷¹ Lee, "[일본 방문]일본 경제단체 주최 오찬사 ([Japan Visit] Speech at the Luncheon Hosted by a Japanese Economic Organization)."

⁷² Myung-bak Lee, "제 8 차 라디오 연설 - 원칙이 바로 서야 나라가 바로 선다 (8th Radio and Internet Speech - Honest Principles Are Needed for the Country to Be Honest)," speech, February 9, 2009.

⁷³ Taekyoon Kim, "History of the Developmental State: the Case of South Korea," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary South Korea*, ed. Sojin Lim and Niki J.P. Alford (New York: Routledge, 2022), 94; Kim and Kim, "Chaebol and the political economy of South Korean development, 1945– present," 113.

⁷⁴ Kim and Kim, "Chaebol and the political economy of South Korean development, 1945– present," 109.

mentioning in a speech that the FKTU played a big role in the development of the country and in the protection of labor rights.⁷⁵ It is true that the FKTU reconsidered their standpoints and their way of operating after the Great Workers' Struggle of 1987, where workers took advantage of the relaxation of the government's tight control on labor to express their discontent about their wages and their lack of rights.⁷⁶ Their actions under the authoritarian regime and their more restrained position in general, however, gave them a reputation that made others distrust them. Lee considers the FKTU as the forefront of positive labor relations, as it, according to him, has agreed to join the government's efforts to revive the economy without engaging in illegal labor-management disputes.⁷⁷ Lee even claims in a speech that the leader of the FKTU told US business owners that laborers will not strike if foreign companies invest.⁷⁸ He considers the FKTU on the side of the government and thus paints them only in a positive light. Korean conservative intellectuals, united under the name of the New Right, promote a framework that advances an alternative narration of history. This narrative postulates that democracy in Korea came to be directly because of the modernization policies and market economy that the Park Chung-hee regime achieved.⁷⁹ In addition to this, they conflate critiques on the contentious actions of the previous authoritarian regime as subverting the legitimacy of the Korean state and they regard such discourse as "a failure to let go."⁸⁰ Lee uses the same rationale for labor repression and the behavior of the FKTU in the past. According to the logic of the New Right, the FKTU's role in helping the government suppress labor served the market economy and thus in turn assisted the process of democratization. Not only does this absolve the FKTU of any criticism, but it has become an example of how labor unions should cooperate with the government. Lee's enthusiasm for the FKTU also demonstrates his tendency to praise those that cooperate with him and to discredit those who are not acting as he wants them to act. The KCTU, FKTU's progressive counterpart, is absent in Lee's speeches, which is not surprising since the KCTU was also systematically excluded from negotiating with the government during his term.⁸¹ Lee thus strategically promotes the FKTU, an organization that actively cooperates with

⁷⁵ Myung-bak Lee, "한국노동조합총연맹 창립 제 62주년 축하 (Congratulatory Address at the 62nd Anniversary of Korea Federation of Trade Unions)," speech, March 10, 2008.

⁷⁶ Soonmee Kwon, "Labour Union Activism," in *The Oxford Handbook of South Korean Politics*, ed. JeongHun Han, Ramon Pacheco Pardo, and Youngho Cho (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 346.

⁷⁷ Lee, "[일본 방문]일본 경제단체 주최 오찬사 ([Japan Visit] Speech at the Luncheon Hosted by a Japanese Economic Organization)."

⁷⁸ Lee, "[미국방문] 워싱턴 동포 간담회 격려사 ([US Visit] Words of Encouragement to Korean residents in Washington)."

⁷⁹ Jamie Doucette and Se-Woong Koo, "Pursuing Post-democratisation: The Resilience of Politics by Public Security in Contemporary South Korea," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 46, no.2 (2016), 201, 213.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁸¹ Kwon and Hong, "Is South Korea as Leftist as It Gets?" 83.

him and has a good relation with conservative presidents, while also ignoring the existence of the KCTU, an organization that does not wish to follow Lee's lead.

All in all, one can see a pattern in Lee's speeches where he identifies labor actors that cooperate well with him, such as the FKTU, and praises them for "working together," which translates to working towards his goals and in the way that he wants them to work. Others, such as the strikers, who do not cooperate and/or collaborate with him, are portrayed in a negative light. While he, as mentioned above, wants labor to be more collaborative and less hostile, he himself shows in his rhetoric the same inflexibility to work with the actors that he does not agree with.

LABOR AND PARK GEUN-HYE (2013-2017)

This section focuses on analyzing the speeches of Park Geun-hye, who succeeded Lee in 2013. Park, the “Queen of Elections,” used the tactic of rebranding her party to win the presidential election.⁸² She renamed her party to Saenuri to mean “new frontiers,” changed the colors from blue to red to illustrate change, and adopted leftist slogans concerning *chaebol*, social welfare, and economic democratization.⁸³ She is the oldest daughter of Park Chung-hee and even served as his first lady when her mother was killed in a failed assassination attempt on her father. Park Chung-hee’s regime was known for the economic development that resulted in the so-called “Miracle on the Han River.” This previous era of growth was a big incentive for people to support Park Geun-hye, as the idea was that she would be able to attain similar results.⁸⁴ Park was the first Korean president to be impeached in 2017 on charges of abuse of power and coercion. This also led to a prison sentence of 25 years and a fine of 20 billion won, which president Yoon Suk-yeol eventually pardoned in 2021.

During her term, Park focuses on four major reforms. One of them is labor reform, with the emphasis being on flexibilization of the labor market. She gives several reasons for the necessity of labor reform. It is needed in order to compete with other countries, to resolve the issues surrounding youth unemployment and irregular workers, and to ensure that the “creative economy and cultural prosperity” can blossom.⁸⁵ According to her, the vested interests of a range of actors obstruct the labor reform plans. The issue of vested interests and rights arises frequently in Park’s speeches. In her eyes, plans are not realized because certain actors are not willing to make the necessary concessions. Just like Lee Myung-bak, she confronts those who are “better off,” such as the union workers at conglomerates, and appeals to them to relinquish their vested interests and concede.⁸⁶ The reasoning she gives is that it is for the benefits of both young people and irregular workers. She, like Lee, relies on the rationale that those who have it better than others have less or no right to hold on to their interests. Other actors that need to

⁸² Kim, “Evolution of Political Parties and the Party System in South Korea,” 75.

⁸³ Yang, *The Political Economy of the Small Welfare State in South Korea*, 185, 197.

⁸⁴ Jamie Doucette, “The Occult of Personality: Korea’s Candlelight Protests and the Impeachment of Park Geun-hye,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 76, no.4 (2017): 851.

⁸⁵ Geun-hye Park, “제 71 주년 광복절 경축식 (Congratulatory Speech at the 71th National Liberation Day),” speech, South Korea, August 15, 2016; Geun-hye Park, “국정운영 대국민 담화 (Public Statement on State Affairs),” speech, South Korea, August 5, 2015; Geun-hye Park, “2015 지역희망박람회 개막식 (2015 Regional Hope Fair Opening Ceremony),” speech, South Korea, September 8, 2015.

⁸⁶ Park, “제 71 주년 광복절 경축식 (Congratulatory Speech at the 71th National Liberation Day).”

concede according to Park are politicians,⁸⁷ multiple labor organizations,⁸⁸ companies – whether small, medium, or big – and workers, especially those with a high salary.⁸⁹ The scope of the actors that she addresses illustrates her need for the compromise of others. Although her rhetoric shows an amiable appeal to the labor actors to cooperate with her, her actual actions towards these actors present a hostile reality, where those not cooperating with her are subjected to police and legal action. Her response to a strike of the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU) against privatization of KORAIL, the Korean Railroad Corporation, was to arrest its 35 leaders and to brand the strike as illegal and a burden to the economy.⁹⁰ With the label “a burden to the economy,” Park denotes the punishable act of obstruction of business. It should be noted that the legal scope of “obstruction of business” is so expansive in Korea that all strikes are essentially guilty of it.⁹¹ The police also raided the houses of the KRWU leaders and accused them of violating the National Security Law and being pro-North Korea.⁹² KCTU in response pressured the government with a threat of general strike, which caused the government to retaliate with police action, which involved 5,000 riot police officers, at the central office of KCTU under the pretense that there were KRWU members hiding there. The scholar Chang categorizes this series of events, which were at the onset of Park’s presidency, as an “assault on the democratic union movement.”⁹³

Park raises several instances from the past where, in her eyes, labor acted correctly by conceding to the government. In a public statement made in 2016, she refers to the miners and nurses who went to West Germany in the 1960s and 1970s and the construction workers who were dispatched to the Middle East in the 1970s and 1980s.⁹⁴ She praises them for their sacrifices and the patriotism that they demonstrated in furthering the Korean economy. These people left their home country to work long hours in foreign countries for financial gains that could not realistically be achieved in Korea. In praising these people and describing this phenomenon as patriotism, Park thus argues that the average person was putting the national

⁸⁷ Geun-hye Park, “제 97주년 3.1절 기념식 (97th Commemoration of the Independence Movement),” speech, South Korea, February 29, 2016.

⁸⁸ Geun-hye Park, “강소.벤처.스타트업 청년매칭 2016년 잡페어 (2016 Job Fair Matching the Youth with Small Giants, Venture, and Start-ups),” speech, South Korea, October 6, 2016.

⁸⁹ Geun-hye Park, “제 69주년 광복절 경축사 (Congratulatory Speech at the 69th National Liberation Day),” speech, South Korea, August 15, 2014; Park, “국정운영 대국민 담화 (Public Statement on State Affairs).”

⁹⁰ Chang, “Korean Labour Movement,” 170.

⁹¹ Doucette and Kang, “Legal Geographies of Labour and Postdemocracy,” 207.

⁹² Doucette and Koo, “Pursuing Post-democratisation,” 209-210.

⁹³ Chang, “Korean Labour Movement,” 170.

⁹⁴ Geun-hye Park, “대국민 담화 및 기자회견 (Public Statement and Press Conference),” speech, South Korea, January 12, 2016.

economy before their personal life. She also uses the previous instances of sacrifice as an exemplary role for the current working force. She mentions in the same speech that, as the people did so much for the country then, she feels that it would only be fair that everyone now should forfeit their individual interests and rights to help their country that was, at that moment, in a crisis. By connecting patriotism with the sacrifices of the working class, Park implies that the manner of achieving economic prosperity in Korea is connected to the willingness of the working class to concede to the needs of the government. However, in her reasoning she forgets that, in return for these specific past sacrifices, workers earned wages that were substantially higher than in Korea. For example, workers in the Middle East were able to get roughly triple the amount of wages compared to home.⁹⁵ Park is asking workers to make similar sacrifices for the country, but without the promises of similar financial gain.

Park generally considers Korea of the past favorably. She reminisces fondly about the “Miracle on the Han River” and how the past 70 years of miracles should be followed by a new 70 years of hope.⁹⁶ While the achievements of the Korean people are remarkable, she fails to acknowledge the circumstances that surrounded that era. Her so-called “past 70 years of miracles” was a time period where, under the guise of “growth now, distribution later,” the authoritarian regime of her father violently suppressed labor rights. This rhetoric corresponds to the New Right framework that glorifies the market economy and that, according to the logic that the end justifies the means, this part of the history of Korea “should be proudly cherished rather than critically questioned.”⁹⁷

Another event she discusses is the tripartite forum called the “Trade Unions, Employers and Government Committee” of 1998, where she praises the cooperation of the labor community at that time.⁹⁸ In order to comply with the IMF’s demands, trade unions ceded the right of employers to dismiss workers and hire short-term workers in their stead, which allowed the employers to break strikes using those short-term workers. Scholars Kwon and O’Donnell consider this “the beginning of a dual labour market structure consisting of a shrinking core of full-time employees and an expanding periphery of contract workers.”⁹⁹ She does not

⁹⁵ Janice Hyeju Jeong, “South Korean Labor and Infrastructure in Saudi Arabia during the Late Cold War,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 43, No. 3 (2023): 471.

⁹⁶ Geun-hye Park, “경제혁신 3 개년 계획 대국민 담화 (Public Statement on the 3-Year Economic Reform),” speech, South Korea, February 24, 2014; Geun-hye Park, “2015 경제계 신년 인사회 (2015 New Year’s Greeting for the Business World),” speech, South Korea, January 4, 2015.

⁹⁷ de Ceuster quoted in Doucette and Koo, “Pursuing Post-democratisation,” 214.

⁹⁸ Park, “대국민 담화 및 기자회견 (Public Statement and Press Conference),”; Geun-hye Park, “2016 년 신년 인사회 (2016 New Year’s Greetings),” speech, South Korea, January 3, 2016.

⁹⁹ Kwon and O’Donnell, “Repression and Struggle,” 278-279.

acknowledge these changes in the labor market that she herself criticizes and claims to fight against in other speeches, but, on the contrary, believes it to be a great step forward in the relation between labor, management, and the government. This praising of the cooperation that eventually led to the worsening of the problems she claims to be against, illustrates how Park's rhetoric is flawed. According to her, organized labor needs to cooperate and the labor market needs to be more flexible. However, she also argues that irregular workers need to be saved from this flexible system, while simultaneously actively advocating for increased flexibility. In one of her speeches, she highlights the difficulties of SMEs and that they need irregular workers in order to survive.¹⁰⁰ While this is reflected in her labor flexibilization policies, it is also completely the opposite of her repeated pleas for improving the fate of irregular workers. One of her solutions for the problems faced by irregulars was the creation of performance-based wages, which she argued would close the gap between regular and irregular employees.¹⁰¹ In reality, it created a workplace environment that heightened competition between employees.¹⁰² Her policies illustrate a clear gap between her addresses and her actions.

Park's style of rhetoric is somewhat different from the other two presidents in this thesis; she often relies on motherly and emotional language. Park, in her speeches, discusses the problems of the youth. In one speech she mentions that labor reform needs to go through and that regulations need to be torn down or else "we have no choice but to watch with regret (...) the screaming of young people who shed tears because they could not find a job."¹⁰³ In another speech, she acknowledges that the labor world disagrees with her labor reform plans but that it is because of the youth that she is going to continue with it.¹⁰⁴ Here she uses the plight of the youth to pressure others to accept labor reform. That labor reform, which essentially meant flexibilization of the labor market, was opposed by the KCTU, which organized a public rally against the new policies in November 2015. The government retaliated by sentencing its leader to five years in prison.¹⁰⁵ This rhetoric rooted in her motherly disposition is something that she also used during her election campaign, where she promised to address several issues regarding wealth redistribution, *chaebol*, and employment, with the help of moderate conservatives.¹⁰⁶ In the end, however, she backtracked on her promises and installed advisors from Park Chung-

¹⁰⁰ Park, "대국민 담화 및 기자회견 (Public Statement and Press Conference)."

¹⁰¹ Park, "경제혁신 3 개년 계획 대국민 담화 (Public Statement on the 3-Year Economic Reform)."

¹⁰² Kwon and Hong, "Is South Korea as Leftist as It Gets?" 83.

¹⁰³ Geun-hye Park, "제 20 대 국회 개원연설 (20th National Assembly Opening Address)," speech, South Korea, June 12, 2016.

¹⁰⁴ Park, "대국민 담화 및 기자회견 (Public Statement and Press Conference)."

¹⁰⁵ Doucette and Kang, "Legal Geographies of Labour and Postdemocracy," 210.

¹⁰⁶ Doucette and Koo, "Pursuing Post-democratisation," 199.

hee's regime and anti-communist and pro-'public security' politicians that devoted themselves to tackling the unions, such as the KRWU incident mentioned above, instead of the *chaebol*. One can thus see how Park uses maternal rhetoric when addressing the people, using the plights of the youth as justification for her actions, but the policies and actions of the government that she leads can hardly be described as motherly.

Park's repeated remarks about how numerous actors should give up their vested interests and concede, as mentioned above, and the praising and longing for the past of "miracles" and so-called "good" labor relations show a certain uncomfortableness with some facets of the democratic political system she is in. In one speech, she argues that the National Assembly should remove regulations and improve the speed of which bills are handled.¹⁰⁷ In another speech, she mentions that Korea had achieved a "dazzling" economic progress and democratization in the 50 years after the Korean war and that it is almost a developed country, but that Korea is unable to overcome that threshold and that it is stagnating.¹⁰⁸ Out of the 50 years after the war, 35 years were under the authoritarian regime of her father Park Chung-hee and later the military dictator Chun Doo-hwan. One facet of authoritarian regimes is the speed and ease with which decisions are made, which is achieved through the suppression of dissent. This kind of system is and should not be possible in a democracy, because it is based on the idea that opposing voices exist and one is supposed to find middle ground. Park's desire for quicker decisions in the National Assembly and her mentions of stagnation could be an indicator of her desire for a faster political system, which would be hard to achieve within the current democratic system.

In the same speech, she denounced the current political system of Korea and criticized the instability and lack of continuity within the 5-year presidential term cycles, arguing that there is a need for constitutional reform and that she will make practical preparations for it. While this criticism of the Korean political system is valid, it is worrying to hear it from a president who idolizes the authoritarian past and who actively suppressed voices of dissent during her tenure. The most prominent example being the existence of a blacklist, where 9,000 artists who voiced critique on the government were put on.¹⁰⁹ The scholars Doucette and Kang argue that this process of political dissent being suppressed during Park's term in office is a sign of Korea entering the stage of post-democratization, where "social rights are increasingly

¹⁰⁷ Geun-hye Park, "미래한국리포트 축하 영상 메시지 (Video Message Celebrating the Future Korea Report)," speech, South Korea, October 30, 2013.

¹⁰⁸ Geun-hye Park, "2015년도 예산안 시정연설 (2015 Budget Address)," speech, South Korea, October 28, 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Chang, "Korean Labour Movement," 170; Doucette, "The Occult of Personality," 854.

subordinated to market logic and state power insulated from popular challenges.”¹¹⁰ One could argue that Park’s general rhetoric in regard to labor is demonstrating a certain unease with the ability of labor to not concede to her demands and a longing to the faster and thus easier decision making of the pre-democratic days, where citizens, including labor, listened because they had no other choice.

¹¹⁰ Doucette and Koo, “Pursuing Post-democratisation,” 200.

LABOR AND YOON SUK-YEOL (2022-NOW)

The last conservative president that this thesis discusses is the president Yoon Suk-yeol, who is currently in office. Yoon won his presidency with the narrowest margin recorded in Korean democratic history, less than one percent.¹¹¹ Before turning to politics, he served as a prosecutor general during the presidency of Moon Jae-in (2017-2022). His background as a prosecutor, during a time where corruption scandals that included politicians were rampant, was welcomed by the ordinary citizen who hoped for anti-corruption measures.¹¹² The scholars Al-Fadhat and Choi argue that the dislike of former president Moon by young men also contributed to the election of Yoon.¹¹³ This, according to them, is illustrative of the beginning of increasing partisan behavior in Korea, which entails that people vote for a certain political party, not because of that party's policies, but to voice their dislike of the other party. As mentioned in the introduction, this section is shorter due to Yoon being in the middle of his term at the moment of this writing.

In his speeches, Yoon takes a different approach to labor unions than his predecessors. While Lee addresses the actions of the unions, mostly their strikes, and Park pleads for concessions, Yoon focuses mainly on the legality of the labor organizations themselves. The reason that he raises these legal arguments could be because of his background as a prosecutor; he knows that his legal background gives weight to his arguments, so he can speak with authority. His main idea, which he conveys in multiple speeches in the same wording, is that legal labor movements should be supported, while illegal actions should be intervened in, regardless of whether it is labor or management committing the illegal acts.¹¹⁴ Although this is a seemingly reasonable demand, one must also consider the ever more legalizing relation between the government and labor. As mentioned throughout the thesis, the democratic

¹¹¹ Ji-hye Shin, "Yoon Suk-yeol elected president by fine margin," *The Korean Herald*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20220310000052>.

¹¹² Faris Al-Fadhat and Jin-Wook Choi, "Insights From The 2022 South Korean Presidential Election: Polarisation, Fractured Politics, Inequality, and Constraints on Power," *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 53, no.4 (2023): 726, 732.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 727.

¹¹⁴ Suk-yeol Yoon, "2024 년 총 지출은 23 조 원 규모로 건전재정 기조 유지...물가와 민생 안정을 최우선에 두고 총력 대응할 것 (Maintaining Sound Fiscal Stance with Total Expenditure of KRW 23 Trillion in 2024... The Stability of Living Costs and Public Welfare Is Top Priority and Will Get an All-Out Countermeasure)," speech, South Korea, October 31, 2023; Suk-yeol Yoon, "내년에는 수출 개선이 경기회복과 성장을 주도할 것, 정부는 회복세가 내수로 이어지도록 집중 지원 예정 (Export Improvement Will Drive Economic Recovery and Growth Next Year, Government Plans to Support Recovery Intensively to Maintain Domestic Demand)," speech, South Korea, December 26, 2023; Suk-yeol Yoon, "2024 년도 예산안 시정 연설 (2024 Budget Address)," speech, South Korea, October 31, 2023; Suk-yeol Yoon, "제 55 회 국무회의 모두발언 (55th Cabinet Meeting Opening Remarks)," speech, South Korea, December 26, 2023; Suk-yeol Yoon, "제 51 회 상공의 날 기념식 특별강연 (Special Lecture at the Celebration of the 51st Day of Commerce and Industry)," speech, South Korea, March 20, 2024.

government's approach to labor is changing from the late 1980s until now from an aggressive attitude to a more restrained one. This meant that new ways of controlling labor had to emerge, such as the increasing use of legal punishment. While the target of the punishments used to be mainly unions and their staff, the focus has shifted increasingly to individual workers. Not only has it become easier to brand collective action as illegal, but also the height of the fines that workers and unions pay has risen considerably. The Committee on Freedom of Association (CFA) of International Labour Organization (ILO) has indicated that the ease of branding collective action as illegal is concerning and reminded the government that individuals and unions should have the right to strike.¹¹⁵ This practice arose during the liberal administrations of Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008), and their justification was that this use of legal measures was “a fairer, democratic alternative to the authoritarian labour control strategies of prior administrations.”¹¹⁶ This kind of labor suppression worsened over the years with the onset of the two conservative administrations of Lee and Park, and with the successful appeal to the OECD to end labor monitoring in 2007, the Korean government could claim to its citizens that it was following international norms.¹¹⁷ While Yoon's claim that management and labor are treated equally signals impartiality, in reality the one bearing the brunt of the legal measures is labor, in the form of both the unions and individual workers. Yoon also demands that labor and management should interact and cooperate on the basis of the rule of law and that the government should be the fair mediator between them.¹¹⁸ However, the laws are shown to be significantly more disadvantageous to labor, and the actions of the government have proved consistently that it does not treat labor and management the same way.

In an April 2024 speech, Yoon looked back on the trucker strikes that took place in 2022.¹¹⁹ There are several notable statements in this speech. Yoon mentioned that 932 people had been ordered to start working again in accordance with the law and, although it was an unpopular measure, that it was necessary for national interest. Not mentioned, however, was the threat accompanying these orders of “cancellation of licences and three years in jail or a fine of up to 30 million won,” which is roughly €20,250.¹²⁰ As the only country in the world

¹¹⁵ Doucette and Kang, “Legal Geographies of Labour and Postdemocracy,” 206.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 209.

¹¹⁸ Suk-yeol Yoon, “제 47 회 국무회의 모두 발언 (47th Cabinet Meeting Opening Remarks),” speech, South Korea, November 14, 2023.

¹¹⁹ Suk-yeol Yoon, “국민께 드리는 말씀 (Words to the People),” speech, South Korea, April 1, 2024.

¹²⁰ Heekyong Yang and Ju-min Park, “South Korea Orders Striking Truckers in Cement Industry Back to Jobs,” *Reuters*, November 29, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-korea-weighs-ordering-striking-truckers-back-work-2022-11-29/>.

that has punishment for withholding labor,¹²¹ Korea handles the collective action of labor by threatening individuals with job loss, imprisonment, or possible debt. Yoon's reasoning that it is in accordance with the law exemplifies the legalization of anti-labor measures and poses the question: is a measure right just because it is legal? One only needs to look at history for dubious examples of legality, such as chattel slavery being legal until 1807: the legality of an action does not correlate with its righteousness. Additionally, Yoon's insistence that it is unpopular but necessary for the national interest is reminiscent of pre-democratization labor approaches of the government where the needs of the people were secondary to the needs of the economy with the argument that it was for national interest.¹²² Multiple times Yoon boasts that the working days lost due to strikes during his term have been one-third of the days lost in other presidents' terms.¹²³ While Yoon sees this as a sign of progress in regard to labor relations, it could also be regarded as an indication that labor's right to protest is declining: neither labor rights nor the relation between labor and management has improved, but rather the increasing risk that unions and individual workers face while partaking in collective action has made it impossible for them to continue as before.

In another speech, he compares the discomfort that normal citizens might have felt due to a two-day protest of the KCTU, suffering from megaphone noises and road occupation, with a violation of their freedom and of their human rights.¹²⁴ In framing the issue as a burden on fellow citizens, Yoon conjures a negative image of the protestors while also vilifying their means of protesting, creating a gap between what he deems "acceptable" and "unacceptable" protests. One must ask the question: what is, according to Yoon, an acceptable protest? In his mind, it is one without noise or disturbance. However, a protest that is both silent and restrained can ignore can hardly be called a protest; in order to have a successful protest, protesters have to inconvenience others to a certain extent in order to make them think about the subject of the protest. The reason that labor resorts to these kinds of protests is because they believe that appealing to politics does not work in Korea. They believe that the political system is centered

¹²¹ Doucette and Kang, "Legal Geographies of Labour and Postdemocracy," 210.

¹²² Kwon, "Labour Union Activism," 354.

¹²³ Yoon, "내년에는 수출 개선이 경기회복과 성장을 주도할 것, 정부는 회복세가 내수로 이어지도록 집중 지원 예정 (Export Improvement Will Drive Economic Recovery and Growth Next Year, Government Plans to Support Recovery Intensively to Maintain Domestic Demand)"; Yoon, "제 55 회 국무회의 모두발언 (55th Cabinet Meeting Opening Remarks)"; Yoon, "제 51 회 상공의 날 기념식 특별강연 (Special Lecture at the Celebration of the 51st Day of Commerce and Industry)."

¹²⁴ Suk-yeol Yoon, "정부는 우리 기업·국민이 국제무대에서 활발하게 기업활동 교류하는 환경 만들어 줘야 (The Government Should Create an Environment in Which Businesses and People Actively Exchange Business Activities in the International Arena)," speech, South Korea, May 23, 2023.

around the president, which makes it difficult for labor to have influence in conventional ways or through party politics.¹²⁵ Not only has collective action been increasingly legally punished, but the scope of protests deemed “acceptable” is becoming increasingly smaller.

All in all, Yoon’s focus on legal issues is emblematic of an ever legalizing and individualizing labor world. Additionally, his background as a prosecutor benefits a change in the system of labor control that began long before he became president. Not only is his background justifying and supporting this focus on (il)legality, but the brandishing of labor’s collective actions as illegal is making it harder for the general public to support the side of labor, which is driving a wedge between the two.

¹²⁵ Kwon, “Labour Union Activism,” 350.

DISCUSSION

As demonstrated in the above sections, the desires of the presidents are similar, yet their rhetoric is different. They all want a cooperative relationship with labor that benefits their government. The reality is that the relationship between labor and the government was never amiable to begin with, and it is unlikely to improve soon. The rhetoric of the presidents might not have persuaded labor, but their speeches have a wider reach. Citizens and other politicians, whether in their own party or in the opposition, need to be convinced of the approaches and rationale of the president, as policy goals are easier to achieve if others agree to the goals in question. In this way, persuasive rhetoric becomes essential in the ability to influence and mobilize the audience, whether it is the national assembly or the voters. A good example of the use of rhetoric is how all three try to create an us-vs-them rationale. Lee and Park both argue that one cannot protest or hold on to their vested interests if there are people who have it worse. Yoon goes for a different approach and drives a wedge between the “normal” citizens and organized labor, as if those in organized labor are not citizens and citizens are not part of the working class that benefits from the actions of labor. All three create an “us” that works hard without complaining and a “them” that is greedy without reason.

Amongst the three presidents, Lee used his background the most to his advantage. His background is the most sympathetic and the most applicable to labor discussions. Not only was he once the worker that he now stands opposite of, but his success story demonstrates that he has the expertise to overcome obstacles and thrive. This gives him authority on all matters of economy, from big business to labor. Yet, considering that he was in management at Hyundai, a *chaebol*, it could become unclear to the audience if his loyalties lie with the working class or with the *chaebol*. On the contrary, Park’s background, as the daughter of a dictator, is a controversial one. Staunch conservatives see it as an asset because they are reminded of her father and hope that she will bring the same prosperity that her father brought. On the other side of the aisle, she is mistrusted for the same reasons. Others feared that she might follow her father’s footsteps and revive authoritarian policies for the sake of the country. Knowing that her background is contentious, she hints at it occasionally by mentioning the positive features, like the “Miracle on the Han River.” That is enough to remind people that her father made those things happen, but subtle enough not to cause concern for a possible authoritarian approach towards labor. Yoon is not very expressive and never mentions his background directly, but his emphasis on legal matters does reveal it indirectly. By mentioning legal matters, he evokes the values of legality, equality before the law, and justice. Assuming that the citizens have faith in the system of the law, his background could be considered solely an asset.

The relevance of this research lies in the gap between their rhetoric and reality and in the persuasiveness of their rhetoric. A relevant example of this gap is the SsangYong Motors strike of 2009 and the way that Lee Myung-bak recounts it in 2011. Lee, through charisma, is able to turn a reality of violent labor repression into a story of good-natured management relations. He is able to simultaneously downplay the hardships of labor and also create, to those who did not know about the violent aspects, a new narrative in which labor is simply stubborn and not willing to cooperate with an accommodating management. This example illustrates the use of rhetoric to spread misinformation and thus create misunderstanding around labor's motives and goals. Labor and government have always been on opposing sides. Now that the country is democratic, it is important for the government to have the people on its side agreeing with its policy. This creates the need to fabricate a rhetoric that feigns nuance but in actuality promotes a one-sided depiction that discredits labor and labels their demands as unreasonable and selfish. In this way, labor is weakened and easier to dismiss and consequently oppress. The persuasiveness of this rhetoric, however, is difficult to determine. On the audience side, it is unclear if the message comes across completely and thoroughly. However, the fact that this discourse is challenging labor, their means, and their goals already has the effect of making people think about and question labor's legitimacy to a certain extent.

CONCLUSION

This thesis answered the following question: how does the rhetoric in regard to labor issues in speeches of three conservative Korean presidents – Lee Myung-bak, Park Geun-hye, and Yoon Suk-yeol – differ? It argues that the presidents' backgrounds determine the rhetoric that they use to a great extent. Through the analysis of their speeches, one can see a clear pattern in which issues they brought forward in regard to labor.

They all relied on their background and expertise for rhetoric. Lee, as a former blue-collar worker and businessman, discusses the practical situations regarding labor, such as strikes and management solutions. Park, a born and raised politician, concerns herself with the more abstract side and talks about possible reforms, concessions, and the past, present, and future relationship of the government and labor. Yoon, the former prosecutor general, leans on his knowledge of the law and focuses on the legality of union themselves and of their strikes and protests. This illustrates that three different presidents with similar values and goals can approach the same, ongoing, convoluted relation between the government and labor in their own individual ways.

This paper illustrates the contrast within the conservative side of politics in Korea and hopes to contribute to the research on the relationship between governments and organized labor. Future research could consider the role that the *chaebol* plays in this specific relationship and how much influence they had and still have in the political system of Korea. It could also be worthwhile to integrate quantitative research methods to come to a more representative conclusion.

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