Reaction Paper 30.05.2023

On p. 4 ff. of Patricia Goeddes paper about the Minbyun, she explains the different ideas about democracy in the Korean society. In the figure on page 5 one can see that in a survey from 1993 about the most important aspects about democracy, economic prosperity, economic security and economic equality were ranked as the top three. I will discuss if this is to be seen as a different model of democracy or as an unconstructive diffusion of the term.

In the Universal Declaration of Human Rights defines democracy as the following: “the will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government”. Argued from a neoliberalist point of view, as long as political rights such as the right to vote, the right to free expression, the right to assemble, etc. are guaranteed in a state, it is perfectly democratic. But in a capitalist sytem with big economic inequalities, the people with economic resources have a way bigger influence on state authority than those without economic resources. People with money can pay for better education and usually already have a network of influencial people that might help them to pursue a political or bureaucratic career themselves. But even as a non-politcian, your economic resources can get you to a higher level of participation. Owners of big companies have a lot of power over the national economy. Often times they use this power to pressure the government into policies favorable for them. Furthermore, big companies and rich individuals have the resources to make big donations to gain the loyalty of certain politcians. People without (rich) economic resources do not have the means to take this level of influence into state decisionmaking. This means that even within a democratic state form and political rights guaranteed under the rule of law, big economic inequalities among the citizens automatically lead to a proportionally big democratic deficit.

So I agree that democracy presupposes a certain degree of economic equality. But I do not agree that economic security in general and, even less, economic prosperity can possibly be a part of the definition of democracy. By that I do not claim that it isn’t valid to value those points most when it comes to government performance, it just has nothing to to with a state being democratic or not.

I feel like in the discussion about the definition of democracy the meaning of the term gets confused with the meaning of ‘good government’. If a government decision has democratic legitimacy and if the decision itself has good or bad consequences for the citizens are two separate issues. While I do think that economic prosperity and security are very valid benchmarks to measure the success of a government, including them into the term ‘democracy’ would make the term so soft and inprecise that it would end up having no clear meaning anymore.

I also do not understand how the Minbyun by focussing on political rights in their beginning instead of socio-economic rights could be framed as communists. In my understanding, communism itself values economic equality way more than individual political freedoms, while focussing solely on the latter would seem much more like a (neo-)liberalist approach to me.

These are my thoughts, but I understand the limitations of my own perspective and would not be surprised if someone in the class discussion could change my mind.

At last I would like to criticise the authour for listing women in the category of ‘communities with specific grievances’, which frankly made me furious.