Citizens of South Korea campaign for investigation of the Sewol ferry accident, 2014-2017

10 May 2014 to 16 April 2015

Country: South Korea
Location City/State/Province: Seoul (capital)
Location Description: The campaign took place in several cities in South Korea, but was centralized in Seoul.

Goals:
The goals included a comprehensive investigation of the Sewol ferry accident, recovery of the ship and the bodies of the victims, and a formal acknowledgement of government culpability.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 034. Vigils › Vigil ceremonies were held in over 140 cities in South Korea, to commemorate the victims, as well as to demand government accountability.

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 034. Vigils

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 034. Vigils

Methods in 4th segment:

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 024. Symbolic lights › Families of Sewol victims hold a vigil, in which each demonstrator held an electronic candle and positioned themselves to form the shape of a ferry.
- 034. Vigils
- 038. Marches › 2,000 protesters march to the Blue House, the residence of President Park Geun-hye.

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 019. Wearing of symbols › Protesters wore a yellow ribbon, which symbolizes hope, to protest the inactivity and lack of response from the government.
Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
Democracy
Human Rights
Group characterization:

- Citizens of South Korea
- families of the Sewol victims

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
families of the victims of the Sewol accident
Partners:
citizens of South Korea
External allies:
several labor unions in South Korea, Korean and Korean-Americans living in the United States

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Families of the victims of the Sewol accident
- citizens of South Korea

Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:

- several labor unions in South Korea

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
Korean and Korean-Americans living in the United States entered the campaign a few months after the sixth segment.

Segment Length: 8 weeks

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
President Park Geun-hye, the National Intelligence Service, Captain Lee Joon-seok and the crew members of Sewol, the Korean national government
Campaigner violence:
Campaigners did engage in property destruction of police cars, which were used to blockade protesters from entering the Blue House, the residence of President Park Geun-hye.

Repressive Violence:
The police force, which was dispatched by President Park Geun-hye, used pepper spray and water cannons against those campaigning.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
6 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

On the morning of 16 April 2014, as the MV Sewol was traveling its usual route, from Incheon, South Korea to Jeju, South Korea, the ferry capsized, killing 304 of the 476 passengers onboard - most of whom were high school students on a class field trip. As the boat was sinking, Captain Lee Joon-seok and his crew told passengers to stay seated, while they fled the scene and were among the first to be rescued by the Korean Coast Guard. The other survivors were rescued by nearby fishing boats, which arrived nearly an hour after the Coast Guard.

South Koreans across the country stood in solidarity with the families of the victims, demanding further investigation of the accident, as well as recovery of the ship - a project, which the government, expected would cost anywhere from $200 million to $500 million. They criticized the crew, who abandoned the sinking ship; the captain, who did nothing to save his passengers; the operators, who allowed a faulty ship to sail; and the government, specifically President Park Geun-hye, who chose to exempt herself from any and all blame for the accident.

Further investigations by the Korea Maritime Safety Tribunal found several alarming problems. At maximum capacity, ships could only carry 987 tons of cargo, according to regulations, but the Sewol was carrying 2,142.7 tons of cargo, most of which was also improperly secured. It was later discovered that Chonghaejin Marine Company, the company that operated the Sewol, profited an additional $2.9 million by overloading the ferry. Additionally, some of the ballast tanks on board malfunctioned. The previous captain of the Sewol had repeatedly warned the ferry company, and they had threatened to fire him if he continued to discuss the poor conditions of the ship.

Shortly before the trial of Captain Lee Joon-seok and several members of his crew, on 10 May 2014, over 20,000 Korean citizens in the city of Ansan participated in a candlelight protest. The vigil served primarily to commemorate the lives of those who were lost, but also called for complete transparency and responsibility regarding the accident. Ansan was the first city to hold a ceremony to protest the government’s corruption, but later 140 other cities in South Korea joined them.

On 15 May 2014, the Gwangju District Court found Captain Lee and three members of his crew guilty of murder, but later acquitted them in November of 2014 and found them guilty, instead, of gross negligence.

A few months later, South Korean investigators discovered that the ferry had been structurally unsound and released this information to the public, who learned about Chonghaejin Marine Company’s negligence for the first time since the accident. Determined to get answers, 2000 protesters began their march to the Blue House, the residence of President Park Geun-hye, on 3 April 2015. The government deployed 13,000 police officers and 270 police buses, which the officers used to effectively block the protesters’ path. As protesters attempted to break through the bus barricades with physical force, many members of the police force used water cannons and pepper spray against them. Nine protesters and three police officers were taken to the
hospital to be treated, while many other protesters were treated on-site.

Shortly after, on 15 April 2015, thousands of people, including families of those lost in the ferry accident, demonstrated at Seoul City Hall, pressing for acknowledgement of government responsibility, as well as the resignation of President Park. They were joined by 40,000 labor union members, who supported these goals, while also maintaining their own agendas for wage stability, job security, and retirement benefits. The government, in an attempt to squash the movement, again deployed the police force, who wore body armor and hid behind riot shields.

Seoul, South Korea. June 2017

President Park responded to the extensive levels of public dissent by giving her strongest indication that she would recover the ship and continue the search for the bodies of the victims. After announcing these plans, however, she left the country for an 11-day trip to Latin America and never returned to the matter.

On the one year anniversary of the accident, over 4,475 people met to hold another vigil in commemoration of those who were
lost on the Sewol. Each participant held an electronic candle, and together they positioned themselves to form the shape of a ferry.

The absence of government response led to growing demands for reform and created a larger national campaign for the resignation of President Park. Focus broadened to include demands for larger reform. Nearly one million South Korean citizens marched in Seoul on 12 November 2016 -- commonly referred to as the “Million-Strong March,” the event was the largest Korean demonstration in almost thirty years. Unlike most of the actions throughout the campaign that expressed feelings of pain and loss, the “Million-Strong March” had a lively and festive atmosphere, with song, dance, and celebration that fostered feelings of optimism and trust.

The tumultuous times of trouble that dominated the initial stages of the campaign were replaced by newfound feelings of hope. People slowly began to see “yellow ribbons” appear on the playgrounds of their schools and on various social media platforms. The yellow ribbon, which was introduced by the parent of a Sewol victim awaiting her daughter’s return, came to symbolize hope and solidarity with the missing passengers. For many, the meaning of the yellow ribbon evolved to symbolize resistance against the corrupt government.

Several Korean-Americans and Koreans living in the United States stood in solidarity with the people of Korea in demanding a thorough investigation of the ferry accident - from marching Harvard Walk in Cambridge, Massachusetts to rallying in front of the Consulate General of Republic of Korea building in Los Angeles, California.

On 16 November 2016, a report written by the South Korean National Intelligence Service reporting the ferry incident to President Park was exposed to the public. The report referred to the trauma of the events of Sewol as “just a ferry accident,” which would spur “protests that must be contained.” The report provided no information regarding those who were lost. Instead, the report proposed methods of manipulating public opinion to minimize campaigner damage and maintain the country’s reputation.

With growing tensions and demands from the people, the National Assembly held an official vote for impeachment of President Park Geun-hye on 9 December 2016. With 78% of the legislature voting in favor of her impeachment, Prime Minister Hwang Kyo-ahn began serving as the head of state. On 10 March 2017, the Constitutional Court unanimously voted to uphold her impeachment, officially removing President Park from office. New and fair elections, were scheduled to be held on 9 May 2017.

While the impeachment of President Park was not a direct goal in the initial stages of campaign, the lack of response to the Sewol ferry accident quickly revealed the extent of corruption and opacity within the South Korean government. Sewol sparked the growing dissent and desire to remove Park from office -- several news sources, including CNN and Al Jazeera, referred to the Park impeachment as a “victory” for families of Sewol ferry victims.

Victims’ families hoped that the recovery of the ship and passengers’ bodies would allow them to “begin to properly grieve.” On 16 March 2017, workers began the salvage operation and found the bodies of 295 of the 304 victims.

Research Notes

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy: Seimi Park, 23/03/2017

A project of Swarthmore College, including Peace and Conflict Studies, the Peace Collection, and the Lang Center for Civic and Social Responsibility.

Copyright Swarthmore College.