

Analyzing the Factors Contradicting Public Opinion and Governmental Decision-Making in the Attitudes of South Korea towards Japan's Nuclear Contaminated Water

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Abstract. In August 2023, Japan began to discharge a pile of nuclear contaminated water into the sea, which is very harmful to the environment and ecology as well as human health. South Korea, as one of Japan's closest neighbours and also the most affected by nuclear-contaminated water, the public broke out in large-scale protests and marches in many places, and was strongly condemned by the opposition party. However, the Korean government also ignored domestic public opinion and the demands of the opposition parties this time and insisted on supporting the Japanese government's behaviour. This paper analyses and compares the conflict between the Korean government and the public, Korean parties, and the international situation through this crisis. The study found that with the polarisation of the Korean political scene and the tension of the international situation, the two-party conflict at home, the international conflict between the two poles against the confrontation led by China, Russia and the United States, the two pairs of major contradictions are gradually severe, in which the interests of the involvement of the authorities and the regime of strife to the extent that the South Korean government authorities to ignore public opinion brought about by the negative impacts of the public opinion, so it chose to focus on stabilizing the situation at home and abroad to stabilize and consolidate the power. Understanding these factors is essential in comprehending the complexities and contradictions between public opinion and governmental decision-making.

Keywords: public opinion; decision making; international relation; Korea.

1. Introduction

Korea has two attitudes in this incident of Japan's discharge of nuclear-contaminated water. The Korean government expresses support and understanding for this incident and says that the people, organizations, and parties opposing the Japanese government's discharge of nuclear-contaminated water are anti-scientific and ignorant; in addition to the authorities of Yoon Seok-hyup, other opposition parties and party leaders reacted violently to this incident. Lee Jae-myung, head of the Common Democratic Party, the largest opposition party in Korea, even took this as an opportunity to go on an "open-ended hunger strike" to demand that the government explicitly oppose the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water from Japan into the sea and apologies to the nation for the destruction of people's livelihoods. The Japanese government and the Tokyo Electric Power Company (TEPCO) have been putting pressure on the Korean government. According to a poll released by the Asian Citizen's Center for Environment and Health on 1st September 2023, 72.4% of the respondents were against the discharge of nuclear-contaminated water from Japan into the sea, and the figure of the opposition call was even higher at 81.8% in the coastal cities of Gangwon Province and Jeju Island [1]. Yoon Seok-hyup's "standing up" for Japan in this incident has led to differences between government decision-making and public opinion and the opposition party, intensifying the conflict between the public and the government and gradually becoming more and more polarized, with Yoon Seok-hyup's latest approval rating according to South Korean pollster Realmeter dropping to 32.5% and his disapproval rate rising to 64.1%, a record high for his position which is a record low since he took office [2].

This article focuses on analysing the influences that created the big gap between public opinion and the government's decision-making in this incident, and tries to identify the more significant

contradictions in the incident that caused the government to ignore the influence of public opinion on the decision-making. The series of issues triggered by Japan's nuclear sewage discharge in South Korea is only a part of the recent social problems in South Korea, and by analysing this specific case to find out the influencing factors and main contradictions of the government's decision-making, it may be possible to explain other existing social contradictions and conflicts in South Korea related to political decision-making, partisan struggles, and the low popular support rate.

2. Literature Review

Public opinion is an important part of a democratic society that can shape and influence government policies, decision-making processes and public discourse [3]. People never think about what the government should do. They think about who is going to make the decision on behalf of the government and the public engage in civil disobedience to let the government know what they think and to change the government's decision, and the person who makes the decision affects whether or not the people engage in defence or dissent. South Korean President's credibility and approval ratings have gone way down because of his many irrational political decisions, and the decisions that he makes become more controversial than others. The people of South Korea have initiated marches and rallies in many places, and the public could lower the adoption rate of a resolution by expressing dissent through official channels, in order to call on the South Korean government to put pressure on the Japanese government to stop discharging nuclear-contaminated water into the sea [4]. However, at this stage, the influence of public opinion on governmental decision-making is smaller than that in the past, and the demonstrations and protests of the South Korean people are not effective at this stage [5]. Demonstrations and protests have not been effective. Many influencing factors create a huge divergence between government decision-making and public opinion, extreme nationalistic sentiments caused by long-term education, collective niche interests against the interests of citizens, and the international landscape and diplomatic constraints are all factors that need to be considered [6,7]. In the existing literature, a generalised government is mostly discussed, but there may also be disputes over interests or inconsistencies in goals between the various branches of government with different responsibilities and powers, and the only governmental decision-making level discussed in this paper is that of the South Korean president and the political circle centred on him (i.e. they have the same goals and interests), and the influencing factors that create a disagreement between public opinion.

3. History and Nationalist Sentiment

The history of the country and nationalistic sentiments play a major role in influencing the public's stance on the incident. Japan and South Korea have a complex and sensitive relationship in history. As early as the 16th century, Japan launched the Wanli Korean War, an invasion of Korea; at the beginning of the 20th century, Japan annexed the entire Korean Peninsula and carried out 35 years of colonial rule, during which Japan carried out a number of unequal and oppressive acts against Korea, such as the forced conscription of labourers, comfort women, and education in slavery, which have triggered a strong sense of nationalism. In addition, the post-World War II Korea was surrounded by neighbouring powers, and the "sense of worry" created a unique historical sadness, as well as the extreme nationalist education of the people, "the Korean national view", which made them naturally wary of foreign powers and strongly nationalistic and exclusive. These factors are the main reasons for the high level of nationalist sentiment in Korea and have had a great impact on their views of Japan.

In the latest poll released by the Korea Institute of East Asian Studies on 13 October 2023, only 28.9% of the Korean people had a "good or mostly good" opinion of Japan, and the Korean people were strongly dissatisfied with Japan's behaviour in World War II and its post-war denial of aggression, so when the Korean people learned that Japan had released nuclear pollution into the sea,

they had strong nationalist exclusivity [8]. Therefore, when the Korean people learnt that Japan had discharged nuclear-contaminated water into the sea, they reacted so dramatically, even though the Japanese government had repeatedly stated that the discharged effluent complied with the discharge standards and would not cause any harm to nature and human beings.

Public opinion represents the interests of the majority of the public, and it should be taken into account when the government makes decisions. The government should weigh the national sentiments and demands against the strategic interests of the country, consider the voices of the public, and safeguard the dignity of the country and the interests of the nation, when public opinion is so strong in response to the incident.

4. Media Development and Access

Recent years have seen the Internet grow rapidly; social media become increasingly popular; and knowledge flow in two directions—breaking down application barriers and developing outside borders. South Korea is a country with an extremely high Internet penetration rate, which has grown extremely rapidly over the past two decades, reaching 97% as of 2020 [9]. Along with the growth of the relevant groups, news has also changed from being distributed in a one-way fashion to being distributed in an interactive, multi-directional manner, allowing individuals to receive a greater variety of information sources that are rich in quantity, quality, and timeliness, enabling the public to easily access current global events in their daily lives.

Unlike in the past, although the media is the mouthpiece of the government, in the era of low internet penetration, people have limited sources to get news, usually only the mainstream traditional media, whose content is more likely to be in line with the government's decisions and attitudes, and spread and propaganda by filtering out the content that is in line with the political direction. But now the internet can have the ability to transmit the information from all over the world. Even if the governments of South Korea and Japan deliberately rewrite the indicators of nuclear-contaminated water as compliant with the emission standard values in news, some countries like China that are against this discharge will also show the detected radiation exceeding values to netizens in the news. So, the government's attempt to reduce and control the direction of public opinion by controlling the information and public opinion can no longer be effectively realised.

However, with the lowering of the threshold for news dissemination, the proliferation of false information has led to the circulation of unconfirmed news on the Internet. In the era of news fragmentation, the reading habits of Internet users have changed, and they usually extract the key to news by seeing whether the headlines are novel and in line with their preferences. Some media, for the sake of traffic flow, make use of the echo chamber effect to write words that can easily resonate with and stir up people's emotions, while pursuing the authenticity of the content, which is readily readable and widely disseminated by these rumours become the public's information cocoon, and they are so convinced that they do not bother to discern what is true from what is false. If the government tries to make corrections, netizens will even be more adamant in their opposition to the government, and the way and content of the media's narratives will influence and even guide the public emotions. When the public emotions are greater than the public rationality in discerning what is right and what is wrong, the public opinion will deviate from the government-led attitude towards a certain event, and public opinion will not be the same as the government's. Public opinion and government decision-making will go to two extremes, and the gap between them will become wider and wider and may even be beyond repair.

5. Political Interests and Diplomacy

5.1. Complex Relationship with Public, Government and Parties

Government decision-making is complex and involves a wide range of interests, including, but not limited to, the personal interests of the decision-maker, businesses, financial institutions, non-

governmental organisations, the public, partisan struggles, international strategic co-operation, diplomacy and so on. However, due to the personalised philosophy of the government or policy makers, public opinion is likely to be ignored in this process. In the case of South Korea, the governmental level's attitude towards the Japanese emissions and sewage incident diverged greatly from the public's demands and objections, but the decision-makers still chose to support and respect the Japanese authorities' approach, even criticising their own nationals. The situation essentially arises from the difference in interests between the government and the public, where the public's demand is to ensure a healthy living environment, diet and personal health.

The ruling authorities hope to gain a better understanding of the situation by maintaining a close relationship and cooperation with Japan. The Korean government has worked closely with Japan to gain political support from Japan and its strategic allies, the United States, and the Western world, so as to create a confrontation with the opposition parties in Korea, ease the pressure on them to propose a cabinet reshuffle, and consolidate the stability of the regime. From the polls, regarding the 2024 National Assembly election, the proportion of those who support the opposition party to check and balance the government and the ruling party has increased by 3%, while the proportion of those who support the South Korean government authorities has decreased by 2%, and the proportion of those who hold a negative opinion on the attitude towards the existing department chiefs is as high as 59% [10]. For the current South Korean president, his personal support rate is even as low as 32%, and the poor rating rate breaks through 60% (in the history of South Korea) (the second-lowest approval rate in Korea's history). The administration continues to look for a quicker and more efficient way to portray a pro-Japanese and pro-American image in order to gain the support of the international community and the recognition of the major powers. This approach, although controversial, can temporarily divert and distract attention and pressure from domestic dissatisfaction and criticism of the Yoon Seok Seop government. However, ignoring public opinion and demands and making decisions that run counter to them will exacerbate the crisis of confidence in the government and the decline of support among the domestic public, while intensifying the internal political struggle in South Korea [11].

5.2. Principal Contradiction

South Korea has two more important contradictions and challenges that the government needs to balance than the conflict between the government and the public, so that the government's consideration of public opinion has declined, or even outright ignored, when making decisions at this period of time. Internationally, there is the confrontation between the trilateral cooperation between the United States, Japan and South Korea and China, Russia and the nuclear security issues of North Korea; and domestically, there is the partisan contradiction between the People Power Party represented by Yun Seok-hyu and the opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea.

Since 2022, driven by internal factors such as the intensification of right-leaning conservatism in domestic politics, as well as external factors such as North Korea's frequent missile and nuclear weapons launches, the prolongation of the Ukraine crisis, and the tense situation in the Taiwan Strait, Japan and South Korea have significantly moved closer to the United States in their foreign strategies, and have strengthened their ties with the United States in the areas of ideology, military security, and industrial science and technology, which has created the conditions for the resumption and deepening of the United State, Japan and South Korea trilateral cooperation [12]. Based on Korea's electoral system of five-year terms and non-renewable terms, the governing characteristics of South Korea's successive presidents show a low degree of policy continuity, and in order to create considerable political achievements, succeeding presidents usually overthrow and deny almost all of their predecessor's governing programmes, and the current president is no exception. He overthrew his predecessor's relatively neutral and balanced approach to diplomacy, highlighting his "pro-US and pro-Japan" orientation, and compromised with Japan by temporarily resolving the historical issues of comfort women and labour claims left behind by Japan and South Korea in the Second World War, resulting in a rapid warming of Japan-South Korea relations, and a closer trilateral relationship

between South Korea, Japan and the United States. With the growing tension in the international situation and the current situation in Northeast Asia, the trilateral leaders' meeting of Japan, South Korea and the United States, held at Camp David in 2023, reached an agreement on political cooperation, military cooperation, economic cooperation, and health and humanities cooperation among the three countries. Such in-depth cooperation also implies a high degree of bundling of interests and values, and as a result, in the event of an incident similar to the discharge of Japan's nuclear-contaminated water into the sea, they will either cover up for each other or give support to each other. In other words, when taking a stand, the government would not consider the scientific or just nature of the incident, but rather whether the common interests would be undermined. Public opinion is the first thing that will be considered to be given up compared to inter-state political cooperation and diplomatic strategies.

In the face of serious confrontation between the domestic government and the opposition, this strong signal of "pro-US and pro-Japan" from the Yun Seok-hyup government is bound to arouse the opposition of the opposition party, the Democratic Party of Korea, which has already requested a cabinet reshuffle, and this time the Yun Seok-hyup government's support for Japan's emissions and polluted water has provided them with an opportunity to protest, and in so doing, has boosted the party's popular support. With the situation between the North and the South going to extremes, and the Yun Seok-hyup government's approval ratings continuing to fall, they will be more likely to maintain close ties with the US and Japan to gain support from their partners and international forces in order to stabilise the political situation against the gradually unifying Kyodo party.

6. Conclusion

A healthy relationship between the government and the public should be mutually supportive and trustworthy. Public opinion should not be a consideration that is ignored and discarded in government decision-making, even when the situation and political pressure at home and abroad are tense. In the current situation, the Korean government's attitude and the contradiction between the government's foreign policy and public opinion in the incident of the nuclear-contaminated water discharge in Japan have been intensifying, and there is even a situation in which public opinion has been neglected in order to alleviate the pressure on the current governmental authorities. The government's failure to seek a balance between its political interests and public opinion has led to the intensification of the political contradictions in the country and the credibility of the government has declined, which is a hidden danger and threat to the smooth development of Korea in the long run. It is worth noting that even with the existing internal circumstances, including the rising support of the opposition party, the public's great dissatisfaction with the government, and the president's continued low approval rating, the government is still able to make political decisions based on their ideas, which shows that it still has some ability to hold real power. Of course, this article has some limitations, discussing and analysing several basic influencing factors from a Korean perspective, but only briefly mentioning the superpower of the United States, which is another big and variable influencing factor in Japan and South Korea as the strategic deployment of the United States in East Asia. The research in this paper still has some limitations. It explains the three main factors affecting the conflict between the government and public opinion in a macroscopic way, but the influencing factors causing this phenomenon must be more than these, and it is impossible to give a definite conclusion on whether the Korean government ignores public opinion or takes less into consideration. When analysing the main contradictions, it is based on the existing polling data and macroscopic news analysis of the international situation, which is subjective to a certain extent. In future studies, quantitative research methodology can be adopted to standardise the definitional criteria, and objective data can be used to show the changes in the strength of public opinion's influence on the government's decision-making, as well as the gaps between primary and secondary contradictions, so as to make this study more objective, comprehensive and convincing.

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