Fear, Hatred, and Anger:

The Affective Politics of Far-Right Protestantism in South Korea

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The Rise of Far-right Protestantism in South Korea

- The recent rise of far-right Protestantism in South Korea can no longer be dismissed as a marginal phenomenon confined to fringe groups. It has become a pressing socio-political reality.

- Since the December 3rd proclamation of martial law, at the center of far-right mobilization stands the Protestant community, providing organization, resources, and narratives.

- Far-right Protestantism is not merely a religious group intervening in politics, but a central agent that exposes, intensifies, and reshapes social conflicts through the politicization of specific affects.

Why an Affective Approach?

- Far-right Protestantism is driven more by powerful affects—fear, hatred, and anger—than by ideology or doctrine, energizing collective action.

- Understanding this requires moving beyond discourse to examine how affect is organized and circulated within power relations.

- It politicizes fear, hatred, and anger—**fear** fueling group formation, **hatred** enforcing boundaries, and **anger** targeting political power—culminating in a Christian nationalist vision that seeks to eliminate perceived enemies and establish a Christian state.

Affective Politics

- Affective politics persuades and spreads political messages by emotionally embedding them in the public, rather than relying solely on logic or facts, with the goal of changing behavior.

- By eliciting strong and immediate emotional responses, it plays a key role in mobilizing people and amplifies the impact of political messages through emotional contagion.

Meaning of the Far-right

- In Western political discourse, the far-right is not a fixed ideology but a set of political patterns responding to social anxieties and identity crises.

- Generally, the far-right emphasizes exclusivity to protect the socioeconomic interests and cultural identity of native citizens, often justifying exclusion of immigrants, refugees, LGBTQ+ people, and other minorities.

- It is typically expressed through populist forms, portraying political, media, and academic elites as corrupt or incompetent, while elevating the "common sense" of ordinary people as a new standard of political legitimacy (Betz, 2003; Kim, 2025).

- Unlike conservatism, which seeks to maintain existing order and values, the far-right distrusts institutional politics and can openly undermine democratic principles and the rule of law.

Meaning of the Far-right

■ In South Korea, the far-right manifests in denying constitutionally mandated impeachment and seeking a revival of past authoritarian regimes.

■ Examples of Far-right Reframing (Kim, 2025): Soldiers storming the National Assembly as "maintaining order," unconstitutional martial law as "enlightenment," court occupations as "democracy movements," violent perpetrators as "patriots," and a president detained for treason as a "victim of human rights violations," subverting and distorting democratic language.

■ Overall, the far-right is a populist phenomenon that ignores democratic procedures, pursues authoritarian and dictatorial politics, and incites hatred and aggression toward vulnerable others (Kim, 2016).

Fear: The Rise of Far-right Protestantism

■ Collective frustration and despair among the public form the starting point of South Korea's far-right phenomenon.

■ Globalization and the 2008 financial crisis triggered economic instability, social polarization, and shaken cultural identities worldwide.

■ In South Korea, economic insecurity, lost prospects for youth, regional disparities, and job crises created an affective environment conducive to far-right populism.

■ Globally, far-right forces gained ground: anti-Muslim sentiment surged in Europe, anti-immigrant hostility escalated in the U.S., and anti-Korean/anti-Chinese sentiment supported Abe Shinzō's rise in Japan (Kim, 2025).

Fear: The Rise of Far-right Protestantism

- South Korean Protestantism has faced both internal and external crises since the 1990s.

- **Population Decline:** Church membership declined sharply after 2000; 144,000 decrease in 2005 census—the first negative growth in Protestant history, unlike Buddhism or Catholicism (So, 2006; Cho, 2014; Kim, 2018, 2021).

- **Loss of social trust:** Repeated scandals in large churches after 2000; 2007 Bundang Saemmul Church incident intensified anti-Christian sentiment (Kim, 2013; Cho, 2014).

- **Rise of "Heretical Sects (이단)":** Aggressive proselytism by groups like Shincheonji and World Mission Society Church of God (Haneunim's Church).

Fear: The Rise of Far-right Protestantism

- **Perceived Political Threats:** Rise of progressive administrations (Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun) was seen as a threat to Korean Protestantism.

- **Opposition to Social Changes:** Secularization, pluralism, feminism, queer theory, and social leftism viewed as anti-Protestant currents.

- **Distrust of Progressive Values:** Human rights, inclusion, equality, justice, anti-discrimination laws, and feminism seen as communist tactics to subvert society (Kim, 2017).

Fear: The Rise of Far-right Protestantism

■ Internal and external crises in Korean Protestantism triggered fear of losing identity among believers.

■ In affect theory, fear reflects not just response to danger, but a sense of existential and identity threat.

■ Fear is expressed as resentment or humiliation; values like love, human rights, and peace are seen as the arrogance of "leftist" or secular elites, mocking and insulting Protestants.

Fear: The Rise of Far-right Protestantism

- Fear expands beyond individual discomfort to a sense that the entire Protestant community is excluded and rejected by society, evolving into conspiratorial imagination.

- Criticism or rejection of Protestantism is reframed as "leftist dictatorship" or "persecution of Protestants," reinforcing feelings of victimhood and persecution (Kim, 2025).

- This affective structure, intertwined with existential fear of Protestantism's survival in Korean society, leads to exaggerated perception of identity loss and overreaction.

Hatred: Defining the Other in Far-right Protestantism

- Fear reduces an uncertain future to concrete threats, locating blame externally and labeling specific "persecutors" of Protestantism.

- *Ressentiment*, rooted in feelings of inferiority and helplessness, focuses on perceived negative traits of those deemed different (Betz, 2003).

- Targets of hatred—sexual minorities, leftists, feminists, Muslims, refugees—are constructed as threats to both Korean society and Protestant identity.

Hatred: Defining the Other in Far-right Protestantism

Hatred: Defining the Other in Far-right Protestantism

- Sara Ahmed argues that when a subject encounters an object, this contact generates affect, which the subject interprets as an emotion, shaping specific responses or relationships (Dahlman, 2023).

- Ahmed emphasizes that affects become **attached** to certain objects or groups, forming boundaries within communities. Affects are not solely internal; they circulate between people, producing surfaces and social boundaries (Ahmed, 2004; Ahmed, 2023).

Anger: Far-right Protestantism and Street Politics

- Hatred transforms into anger in public spaces, which in turn justifies hatred and reinforces collective identity.

- Far-right Protestants assert their presence through rallies, demonstrations, prayer meetings, and marches, with **public worship** being most prominent.

- Religious rituals in public spaces amplify and circulate affect, functioning as a key affective mechanism in far-right Protestant politics.

- Practices like speaking in tongues, collective praise, and chanting help internalize far-right beliefs and affects, fostering a unified and strong collective identity among participants.

Anger: Far-right Protestantism and Street Politics

- The so-called "Gwanghwamun rallies" led by Jeon Gwang-hoon are filled with anger rather than reverent worship, featuring shouting, insults, and extreme rhetoric.

- Religious practices in public spaces make the Protestant social presence visible again.

- Anger in the streets spreads to surrounding audiences and is amplified through digital media.

Anger: Far-right Protestantism and Street Politics

- Digital media acts as an affective platform, enabling emotions and feelings to be instantly shared and circulated among users.

- Far-right Protestant discourse circulated online goes beyond information transfer, stimulating emotions and beliefs to shape far-right political and religious subjectivities.

- Algorithmically recommended and reproduced content fosters continuous interaction, producing affective subjects formed fluidly within emotions and networks rather than fixed identities.

Establishment of a Christian Nation Ideology

- Hatred toward the "other" promotes imagining a utopia where hostile forces threatening Protestantism and the nation are eliminated, linking anger at current power to a call for a Protestant-based political vision.

- Love, understood not as the opposite of hatred but as another form of it, drives the protection of "what we love" by excluding and hating those deemed different.

- When love attaches to in-group members and hatred to out-groups, it creates positive attachment among imagined collective subjects: "We hate together, and this hatred unites us" (Ahmed, 2004).

Establishment of a Christian Nation Ideology

- Love directed inward, built as a counterpoint to hatred of the other, extends into the ideology of a **Christian nation**.

- Perceived crises—declining church influence and fear of pro-North/anti-American forces—revive the vision of a Christian state envisioned by Syngman Rhee; far-right Protestants revere him as the builder of Korea's Protestant-based identity.

- Korea is seen as originally founded as a Christian nation, with Koreans regarded, like the Israelites, as God's chosen people, making Protestantism synonymous with the nation's spiritual and national identity (Kim, 2025).

Establishment of a Christian Nation Ideology

■ The "Christian Nation" ideology builds on the state discourse of the National Prayer Breakfast since the 1960s, combining religious belief with nationalism.

■ Early Protestant leaders framed the "evangelization of the nation" as the ultimate goal, sharing a theocratic imagination of a God-governed and God-chosen country.

■ This ideology was revived in 2024 with the film *The Birth of Korea* and now forms a central component of far-right Protestant discourse.

Establishment of a Christian Nation Ideology

- Far-right Protestants attempt to reconstruct the next generation's identity around Protestantism through alternative educational institutions.

- Busan's Segero Church, a rising far-right force, opened the **Segero Unam Christian Academy** (named after Syngman Rhee's pen name, Unam) to cultivate future generations for building a Christian nation (Jang, 2025).

- Education becomes an affective space that internalizes embodied faith and worldview beyond ideological debates.

Conclusion

- An affective approach offers a key lens for understanding far-right Protestantism.

- Simply criticizing their narratives and practices as illogical or irrational is ineffective and may even strengthen their political actions.

- Since their discourse operates through the mobilization of affects, effective responses require understanding how fear, hatred, and anger are produced, spread, and politically organized.