

Change: a fast, disorienting opportunity

May 29, 2017

I had the wonderful pleasure of being able to spend March through May in the land of my birth. And what a time it was! As an American, I was fascinated, and uplifted by what I witnessed.

Korea is in a time of change, the kind that happens only once in a generation, maybe even longer. My hope is that Koreans realize that, disorienting though the speed of that change may be, it offers great opportunity.

Perhaps many in this country, given the speed of events here in the last year, have not had time to stop and reflect. But as an outsider I can tell you that the Korean democratic process, whatever you may think of the particular merits of what happened, looked magnificent.

A scandal uncovered by a free press, peaceful citizen demonstrations pro and con, a constitutional process of impeachment, fast and fair elections in which all the candidates presented their views rationally. I have talked to many of my American, Asian and European friends and business associates and all were impressed.

Now the Korean body politic must decide what it all means and what changes need to occur to respond to the momentous events. It will not be easy, since when change has been unleashed the first rule is "expect the unexpected." But it will be important to keep perspective and the civility shown over the last year.

The second rule is that if the end goal is kept in mind, and worked back from, to do today what is necessary to get there tomorrow — and avoid changing what doesn't need to be changed, or will be counterproductive to the end goal — then change is opportunity. What is holding you back can be gotten rid of, what assists you can be kept. If Koreans can decide what their country, their peninsula, and their region, should be like for the next decades, or century, then they have an opportunity to make it so.

In that regard, I found a very different tone in two "salons" I hosted in Seoul (salon: an

invention of the Enlightenment in which guests eat, socialize and discuss an important topic in a polite and honest manner.) At the first one, in October 2015, there was deep pessimism that the right-left political divide in Korea could ever be bridged, and it would continue to paralyze Korea. When almost the same people met in April of this year, they were much more optimistic that there was a possible way ahead.

I will admit that I am not impressed by everything. The ugly show in which members of the National Assembly threaten to make an issue of the citizenship of the children of nominees for government positions I find appalling. Globalization is one of the underpinnings of Korea's wealth. Koreans have gone into the world to learn and to serve. They should not be penalized for that and their children, as free persons, should not either. To fully seize the new opportunities Korea has, it should reject small-mindedness.

*CEO of CBOL Corp., a California aerospace firm, and a member of the Council on Foreign Relations.

Spencer H. Kim