

# In Search of a Civil Society in South Korea\*

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## Abstract

The language of civil society is widely used in South Korea since the democratic transition in 1987. As elsewhere, South Korea's recent democratic transition is often interpreted as a consequence of the "resurrection of civil society." The words, "resurrected," "reactivated," or "reconstituted," are frequently used phrases in the literature on transitions from state socialism in eastern Europe or on democratic transitions in Spain and Latin America. By using the same terms, analysts of the South Korean transition tend to make the same assumption that civil society in Korea had been in existence for a long time, although severely constrained and stifled by state repression. A critical moment for democratic transition arrived, according to this view, when this dormant or suspended civil society became activated or resurrected by certain critical political events.

This perspective, however, raises several important questions to be answered. Since when can we say that civil society has existed in Korea? What are the origins of this civil society? And what is the nature of Korea's civil society in comparison with the ideal type of civil society drawn from Western experiences? This paper seeks to answer these questions with a critical review of the current literature on Korean civil society and democratic transition.

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Civil society is an old notion rooted in the early experiences of Western Europe. The revival of this concept owes a great deal to the remarkable political development in eastern and central Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. The sudden collapse of Soviet-style communist regimes in the region was frequently interpreted as a consequence of the resurgence of civil society in opposition to the oppressive state socialist system. The “resurrected civil society” was looked at as a major weapon against despotism and as a major means of deepening political reforms in the post-socialist societies.

The popularity of the civil society concept, however, is not restricted to countries with a European historical background. The concept is often used in Latin America and in East Asia as well. Many Latin American countries can claim to have a tradition of civil society due to the legacy of European colonialism. But even in East Asia, which obviously had a very different history and set of traditions than Europe or Latin America, the language of civil society has great appeal and is used as frequently to talk about the recent transition to democracy as in other continents. To a certain extent, this is because the notion of civil society is both an analytic and normative or political concept. Civil society is generally accepted as something desirable to have, for both promoting democracy and achieving a good society, and as an important barometer of modernity and social progress in the Third World.

The purpose of this essay is to review how the concept of civil society has been used in one East Asian society, South Korea, in the context of its recent transition to democracy and to examine how the development pattern and the character of civil society that has emerged differs from the patterns drawn from the early Western European experiences.

### **Origins of Civil Society in South Korea**

The political transition to democracy in South Korea occurred in June 1987 as a consequence of massive-scale street protests by students joined by a large number of white-collar workers and other citizens. This massive mobilization of anti-government protesters forced the Chun Doo Hwan regime to surrender to the “people’s power” and to agree to implement a direct presidential election, scheduled in December 1987. Substantial political liberalization began to occur from the summer of 1987.

This sudden political transition and the events that followed led many students of Korean development to use the notion of civil society to interpret the process. It is a well-known fact that South Korea achieved rapid industrialization in the past four decades, accompanied by a rapid expansion of the middle class. It is thus generally assumed that Korea's civil society grew as a consequence of the vigorous market economy and the expansion of the middle classes, in more or less the same fashion as civil society developed in the early industrialized societies in the West. The civil society that emerged became increasingly discontent with authoritarian rule and supported the student-led democracy movements, leading ultimately to the demise of military rule in 1987.

In a recent book on Korean democratic transition, *Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society*, Kim presents a widely accepted view among Korean scholars about an important role of civil society in South Korea's democratic transition: "The resurrected, reactivated, and re-mobilized civil society drove the reluctant and often recalcitrant ruling regime to initiate and pursue democratic reforms. In this regard, the resurrection of civil society came *before*?not during or after?the transition."

The words, "resurrected," "reactivated," or "reconstituted," are frequently used phrases in the literature on transitions from statist socialism in eastern Europe or from authoritarian rule in countries like Spain, Brazil, Mexico, Chile, and other Latin American countries. By using the same terms, analysts of the South Korean transition make the same assumption?that civil society in South Korea has been in existence for a long time, but has been severely constrained and stifled by state repression. A critical moment for democratic transition came when this dormant or suspended civil society became activated or resurrected by certain critical political events.

This perspective, however, raises several important questions that have not been satisfactorily examined in the current literature. Since when can we say that civil society has existed in Korea? What are the origins of this civil society? And what is the nature of Korea's civil society in comparison with the ideal type of civil society drawn from Western experiences?

It seems to be a dominant view among Korean scholars that the early emergence of civil society in Korea is to be found in the second half of the 19th century, when there appeared several civic associations formed by reformist intellectuals. The Independence Association formed in 1896 was

one example. These civic associations were formed to protect national integrity from Japanese and Chinese interference and to push for modernization in decaying Chosun society. Some scholars even argue that civil society had existed in Confucian Chosun all along. One Korean scholar, for example argues, that “the government organization of the Chosun dynasty contained “probably the most elaborate form of Confucian checks and balances.” The Confucian norm of remonstrance which required scholar officials to provide righteous advice to the kingship is one example of free communicative process. He also suggests that the “backwoods literati” and private schools they established played an important role in opening a kind of “public sphere” during the Chosun dynasty.

I find this argument problematic in several aspects. First, Chosun society in the 19th century did not have a necessary economic base?specifically, a sufficient market economy?to produce a civil society. Without a necessary economic base, the public sphere that might have existed was too limited in scope and nature to comprise what can legitimately be called a civil society.

Second, we must recognize that there was no separation of state and society in Confucian political and philosophical order. The idea of the separation of society and the state, and the importance given to the sphere of social life as distinct from the state, is a key in the 19th century Western liberal political thought. Such an idea was alien to Confucian political thought. In Confucian philosophy, state and society constitute one entity, a moral and ethical unity, inseparable from each other. Whereas society is subsumed under the state, state power is also subordinate to a higher morality that ought to govern both state and society.

Third, Confucianism does not encourage an essential normative element of civil society, which is pluralism. The Confucian ethics do not stress such values as pluralism, diversity, and respect of different ideas and opinions. As David Steinberg correctly points out, “Conformity, the adherence to social norms of behavior, and its intellectual corollary, orthodoxy, have been major social forces in Korean history, perhaps more so than in many other nations.”

If we reject the Confucian origin of civil society in Korea, where then can we find its historical origins? In my earlier study I have argued that the origins of both the strong state and what I called a “contentious society” must be sought in the conflict-ridden political processes that have evolved

in the Korean peninsula since the end of the 19th century. The origins of Korea's strong state are historical and geopolitical, involving a long tradition of a centralized state structure, the colonial legacy of strong state apparatus, the impact of the Korean War and national division, and the intense Cold War environment. These historical and geopolitical conditions established the state as the most dominant institution standing above society possessing immense capabilities of coercion.

But the same historical experiences brought into being a relatively strong and highly politicized society. Japanese colonial rule proved, in many ways, to have exerted the most critical influence on shaping the state–society relations in Korea. It is during this period that a separation of the state and society began to occur, as the state power represented alien power rather than moral authority. This political change fostered strong anti–state orientation as an important trait of Korean intellectuals' political culture. And it is the bitter experience of Japanese rule that gave rise to strong nationalism as an overriding ideology of the Korean people.

The contentious and unruly character of South Korea's civil society stemmed basically from the fact that subsequent political development in Korea continuously denied the Korean people opportunities to restructure state power according to their nationalist ideals and democratic political values. Their frustration began with the end of colonial rule which brought not a genuine liberation but another form of foreign domination, unwanted national division, and the revival of the old power and the colonial apparatuses of control. The Korean War and strong U.S. support prolonged the life of the Rhee regime which lacked political legitimacy. The student uprising in 1960 toppled this regime and brought another opportunity for a radical change, but again, the people's hopes were dashed only a year later by a military coup. A third opportunity came in 1979 but again it was stolen away by another military coup in 1980. All these political experiences intensified anti–state, anti–hegemonic political consciousness among Korean students and intellectuals and spurred social movements directed against state power lacking political and moral legitimacy.

From a theoretical point of view, the state–society relations in Korea demonstrate two important aspects. First, state–society relations need not be understood as a zero–sum relationship. A strong state does not necessarily entail a weak society; nor do overdeveloped state institutions produce a submissive or quiescent civil society. Second, in Korea, unlike in Western societies, civil society arose not under the leadership of the bourgeoisie, but in opposition to it. The Korean capitalists' close ties with

and dependence upon authoritarian state power prevented them from playing a leading role in promoting civil society, and instead became an object of antagonism from the emerging civil society.

Civil society in South Korea was gradually shaped by these historical experiences of political change and the export-oriented industrialization that has characterized the country since the early 1960s. Industrialization has produced new social forces and classes that provided the social base for an emerging civil society. The civil society that emerged in the 1980s, in my view, was at best a nascent civil society. It was made not so much of dense intersecting networks of civic organizations and voluntary associations as of subterranean networks of pro-democracy movements, labor groups, and dissident intellectuals, and their opposition ideology and political culture. Therefore, my view does not agree with an image of an already-existent civil society in South Korea that was suddenly resurrected or resurfaced at some critical political juncture. Instead, I would argue that in the pre-1987 period a highly contentious and resistant civil society emerged, but only in an embryonic form.

### **Civil Society in Democratic Transition**

Civil society in South Korea, however, began to grow rapidly since the democratic transition that began in 1987. Most remarkable was the rise of what are called citizens' movement. The decade following the democratic transition saw the sprouting of a bewildering variety of civic organizations and voluntary associations. They included such organizations as the citizens' coalition for economic justice, the league of anti-pollution movements, feminist groups, teachers' associations for educational reform, journalists' associations for press freedom, and citizens' watch groups for fair election, citizen groups to fight political corruption or to fight regionalism, pressure groups for ensuring responsive state agencies, and so forth.

The second edition of the Directory of Korean NGOs, published in 1999, listed 7,600 organizations (20,000 including local branches), and a majority of them were formed in the 1990s. The number doubled even during three years from 1996 to 1999. During the 1990s, citizen groups grew impressively not only in terms of size and density but also in the amount of influence they wielded in the policy-making arena. Their activities are visible in many diverse areas of public concern, ranging from environment protection, economic distribution, and political corruption to traffic problems, trash collection, and campaign against excessive consumption.

It is useful to briefly examine the three largest and most influential movements in the 1990s. One is the Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ), founded in July 1989 by some five hundred people (primarily professionals such as professors, church leaders, lawyers, doctors, writers, journalists, and the like), the CCEJ took "injustice" in wealth formation and income distribution as its main target of activities. In particular, it focused on the issues of unearned income, real estate speculation, and inadequate financial and tax systems for their main targets of civil campaigns. From the outset, the Citizens' Coalition proclaimed that it would be committed to a peaceful, non-violent civil movement, and a "non-political" movement, in which "both the haves and the have-nots can participate." Within three years of its formation, its membership grew from some 500 to 7,000, and by 1993 it came to have 10 regional chapters, specialized research institutes, a publishing house, and its own bi-monthly magazine.

Another important movement organization, the Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM) was formed in 1993, succeeding the active environmental movement organization, called the Korean Anti-Pollution Movement Association (KAPMA), which was established in 1988. As of December 1998, the KFEM had 32 regional offices and 50,000 dues-paying members, including many working journalists, lawyers, professors, religious leaders, medical doctors, nurses, social workers, artists, businesspersons, farmers, workers, students, and ordinary citizens. The leadership positions of the KFEM are filled with the new urban middle class. The KFEM is Korea's largest environmental NGO for pursuing the goals of environmental protection, peace keeping, and human rights. It campaigned against the expansion of nuclear energy and the construction of industrial complexes on national parks, and it also fought the provision of public goods such as environmental protection, peace keeping, and human rights. It also launched a series of campaigns for clean air and water, and for the conservation of the nation's forest and sea ecosystems.

A third influential movement, the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), was established in 1994 by some 200 young "progressive citizens," mostly professionals, such as professors, lawyers, and doctors. The activists who joined this group were dissatisfied with the moderate or conservative orientation among the leadership of the CCEJ and with the latter's distancing from the more progressive *minjung* (people's) movement. Drawn from more progressive professionals, the PSPD leaders have sought to bridge the gaps between moderate citizens' movement and more radical *minjung* movement. As the early popularity of

the CCEJ began to recede, largely for some internal organizational problems, the PSPD has emerged as a more influential civic organization in the late 1990s.

Of many activities organized by these citizens' movements, two recent activities launched by the PSPD are worth noticing here. One is the Small Shareholders' Rights Campaign. In 1998, the PSPD proposed an initiative to protect the rights of minority shareholders and to increase transparency of corporate management. To achieve this goal, the PSPD waged a campaign to encourage every Korean citizen to hold 10 stocks in a major *chaebol* (conglomerate) company. Subsequently, the PSPD filed class action suits against several *chaebol* firms on behalf of minority shareholders, charging the companies with mismanagement and abuse of power. Other civil society groups, including the CCEJ, also joined the movement for *chaebol* reform. The ultimate objective of the campaign is to reform corporate governance characterized by over-diversification, excessive debts, inside trading, and family inheritance of ownership.

A more recent civic activity that received much attention was a civic campaign to prevent corrupt politicians from running in the general elections in April 2000. Some 400 civic bodies formed the Civil Alliance for the 2000 General Elections. Three months before the election, the coalition released a list of 167 politicians who were judged unfit candidates for National Assembly, because of their past involvement in corruption or uncivil activities. The alliance successfully forced the lawmakers to rewrite the election law and drop some unfit candidates from party nominations. But, when many of listed politicians still managed to obtain party nominations and ran for election, the alliance campaigned vigorously to have the blacklisted candidates defeated. And they succeeded quite impressively. Of 86 blacklisted candidates, 59 were defeated; and of the 20 who were targeted for special campaign, only one was able to win. So, after the elections were over, news media all proclaimed that the real winner in this election was the Civic Alliance for the general election.

All these social movements are aimed, consciously or unconsciously, to create and expand a civil society in South Korea. They fit the common definition of civil society as being "the realm of organized social life that is voluntary, self-generating, (largely) self-supporting, autonomous from the state, and bound by a legal order or set of shared rules." Clearly, civil society in South Korea became wider, thicker, and stronger as democratization has proceeded since 1987.

What account for such a dramatic growth of civil society movements in South Korea in the 1990s? Several reasons can be suggested.

First of all, the proliferation of these civic activities, and the reasons why civic organizations were welcomed by the public, was because of many social problems created during the process of rapid economic development. They include the problems of maldistribution, pollution, unethical corporate practices, educational problems, traffic problems, and the like. These are in a sense undesirable side effects of the state-led and *chaebol* (conglomerate)-dominated economic growth, but they have been left unaddressed by any group in society so far. Neither the student movement nor the popular *minjung* (people's) movement, not to mention the labor movement, paid much attention to these issues. But these issues were of serious concern to the majority of the population regardless of their class positions.

Second, the democratization process itself generated much frustration and dissatisfaction among the public. South Korea is widely regarded as a successful case of transiting smoothly from the transition to the consolidation phase of democracy. Yet, the majority of Koreans are very unhappy with the current state of politics. In the process of Korean democratization, it became clear that party politics, or political society, is probably the most difficult arena to reform. Korean party politics has long been based on regionalism, personalism, bossism, and parochial ties based on schools, clans, villages, and the like. Political parties depend on regional and personal loyalties to mobilize support, and parties have come and gone with the personalities around which they formed. The politics in the National Assembly is dominated by opportunistic partisan bickering but fails to address important substantive issues with any consistent policy orientations. People were extremely dissatisfied with rampant corruption, bossism, and money politics, but the political society is very difficult to reform. Under these circumstances, vigilant civic organizations were looked at as the most reliable means of exerting pressure on politicians to reform the political process, although the results of their activities were not wholly satisfactory.

Third, the growth of civic organizations was due not only to objective social problems and what they can do for these problems but also to the favorable external and internal environments for their growth. The civic organizations received much support from media and the government as well as from international organizations. Korean news media have given extensive coverage of civic groups' activities, and their reports have been

exceedingly positive and favorable. This was largely due to the fact that newspaper reporters and citizen movement activists are closely connected with each other and share basically the same orientation to social reform. Another important factor was the support from the civilian governments of Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae-jung. In particular, the present government of Kim Dae-jung has actively sought to ally with the citizens' movement groups in order to overcome its handicaps as a minority government. Furthermore, civic organizations drew support from the international community. External support was both direct and indirect; Korean civic associations developed in close linkages with the "global civil society" and drew much organizational and ideological support therefrom.

The new social movements that emerged in the 1990s are led by middle-class members and their primary constituency is also the middle classes. The absolute majority of those who are involved in civic group activities are professionals and white-collar workers. Most of them were ex-student leaders, labor activists, and leaders of the radical *minjung* (people's) movement. They came to believe that the days of street demonstrations and extra-legal actions are gone and that the present time demands peaceful and rational citizens' actions to deepen social and economic democracy.

Increasingly, these social movements consciously tried to keep a distance from the labor movement and from the broader *minjung* movement. The separation of the labor movement and social movements is, in fact, the most significant development in the 1990s. Whereas most social movements in the 1980s, like the environmental movement and urban housing movement, were closely allied with the labor and student movements, under the same ideological banner of *minjung*, in the 1990s tensions and competitions began to appear between the two types of movements, eventually leading to a clear separation of the two. With this bifurcation of social movements, the labor movement and the *minjung* movement declined noticeably, whereas the new social movements grew at a remarkable pace. As Keane argues, "the exuberant development of one part of civil society may, and often does, impede or oppress its other parts." In South Korea, the citizens' movement has grown more or less at the expense of the radical *minjung* movement, which constitutes another pillar of South Korea's civil society.

## Concluding Remarks

The rise of civil society in South Korea was intimately related to the process of democratization. It emerged in an inchoate form in the process of pro-democracy movements in the 1970s and the 1980s, and it began to expand rapidly in a more institutionalized and organized form after the democratic transition in 1987. Thus, the South Korean case supports the widely held claim that civil society is an essential element in bringing about and in completing democratization process in all new democracies. Schmitter, for example, argues: "While its historical origins are unequivocally rooted in Western Europe, the norms and practices of civil society are relevant to the consolidation of democracy in all cultural and geographic areas of the world." The South Korean case is consistent with his proposition.

It requires a close analysis, however, to determine whether, or to what extent, the civil society we talk about in South Korea today is same as the ideal type of civil society derived from the Western European experiences. As I pointed out earlier, the civil society that appeared in South Korea during the pre-democratization period was not composed of autonomous associations and civic activities which were bound by laws but instead was based primarily on networks of dissident organizations and pro-democracy movement circles which existed outside legal framework. If civil society is defined as autonomous associations that operate within the framework set by laws, as is most commonly defined in the literature, perhaps there was no civil society in South Korea prior to the democratic transition. For the majority of civic organizations that existed prior to 1987 were either outside the legal framework (*chaeya*) or government controlled (*dyong*) ones.

The multiplicity of civic organizations that sprouted in the wake of South Korea's democratic transition conform more closely to the established definition of civil society, in terms of their autonomy from the state, voluntary participation, and lawful actions. Whereas the previous form of civil society organizations were formed by dissident intellectuals, students, and labor activists, the post-transition type of civic activities were organized and constituted predominantly by middle-class citizens. The latter involve broader segments of citizens acting collectively in a public sphere to express their interests, passions, and ideas. Thus, in South Korea as elsewhere, it may be more proper to say that a civil society occurred after rather than before democratic transition. In fact, this is what O'Donnell and Schmitter argue that the "resurrection of civil society" usually occurs after and not before the transition has begun. The only important caveat to be added is that in South Korea it was not the "resurrection" but more or less a new making of a civil society.

Furthermore, there is still a lingering question whether the blossoming citizens' movement in South Korea really represents a civil society in the full sense of the term. Civil society means more than autonomous organizations or group activities but implies a certain set of norms and value orientations including pluralism, individualism, relativism, or more generally, civility. Civility is a core normative element of a civil society, and the main reason why civil society is presumed to play such an important role in promoting democracy and a good society is because of this cultural aspect of civil society. As Shils argues: "Substantive civility is the virtue of civil society. It is the readiness to moderate particular, individual or parochial interests and to give precedence to the common good." To what extent, does civility or pluralism characterize the attitudes of most civic organizations in Korea today? Although hard evidence is unavailable, enough soft evidence suggests that civility is not only lacking in many civic group activities but also is not a widely shared goal of value commitment among their participants. Rather than demonstrating tolerance, pluralism, or compromise, South Korea's civic organizations often engage in an exclusive, uncompromising, and maximalist pursuit of their goals. It might be due to the Confucian cultural tradition, or due to their germination under the harsh authoritarian rule. Or it may be simply because these civic organizations are still at a formative stage. With growing maturity and with expanding networks of interconnected groups, civility and social trust may also grow and become a dominant trait of Korea's civil society as well.

## Endnotes

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