

# 3 Civil society and democratization in South Korea

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## Introduction

Analysts of Korean politics have tended to present two different, and to some extent conflicting, interpretations regarding what really caused South Korea's recent democratization since 1987. According to one popular interpretation, it was primarily – if not entirely – due to a series of elite calculations and interactions.<sup>1</sup> The focus of this interpretation is June 29, 1987 on which the chairman of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, Roh Tae Woo, made his eight-point proposal on democratic reform – the “June 29 Declaration.” It is still disputable if there existed a real split between the “hardliners” and the “softliners” within the ruling elite.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, according to this interpretation, ruling elites predicted that the opposition would be fragmented, and this is why they agreed to adopt a set of democratic reforms including a change to a direct presidential election system.

The other interpretation, which I support and develop in this chapter, puts emphasis on mass mobilization by civil society groups. The central event, according to this interpretation, is not Roh Tae Woo's June 29 Declaration but a series of nationwide anti-government protest demonstrations from approximately June 10 to June 29, 1987 – the “June Popular Uprising.” This approach in essence argues that what was crucial for the democratic transition in South Korea in 1987 was the formation of a pro-democracy coalition and an unprecedented level of mass mobilization, which eventually pressured the ruling authoritarian regime to accommodate popular demand for democratic reform.<sup>3</sup>

These two different interpretations of South Korean democratization closely mirror the two dominant paradigms in the existing literature on democratic transition and consolidation. On the one hand, there is an elite-centered paradigm, emphasizing elite strategies and interactions. According to this paradigm, “elite dispositions, calculations, and pacts ... largely determine whether or not an opening will occur at all.”<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, there is a mass-centered paradigm, accentuating mass mobilization and civil society.<sup>5</sup> According to this paradigm, the choices that civil society groups and mass publics make induce elites to move towards democracy. In general, the elite-centered paradigm is more applicable to “pacted” transitions, whereas the mass-centered paradigm better explains “reformist” or “revolutionary” transitions.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the relative importance

of elite vs. mass factors depends, at least in theory, on the specific case and its mode of transition. In practice, however, most cases present mixed pictures. For instance, even with regard to the Spanish case, which is considered to be a classic example of a pacted transition, the two interpretations are still competing and clashing.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the debate on elites vs. masses is far from being settled.

The main purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the mass-centered approach, i.e., the “June Popular Uprising” interpretation, is a more appropriate explanation for the case of South Korean democratization. The mobilization of civil society was extremely important in South Korea’s democratic transition. Furthermore, I argue that civil society has been crucial in the politics of democratic consolidation of South Korea too. In the course of this analysis, I first examine the role of civil society groups in the democratic transition during 1984–87. Next, I analyze the role of civil society groups in the politics of democratic consolidation since 1988 to the present. I then conclude with a few theoretical reflections on the debate about elites vs. masses and on the implications of active civil society for further democratic consolidation in South Korea.

### **Civil society and the democratic transition, 1984–87**

Severe state repression of civil society characterized the first four years (1980–83) of the Chun Doo Hwan regime. Following the violent suppression of the pro-democracy movement in Kwangju in May 1980, the authoritarian regime implemented a series of coercive campaigns to “cleanse (*chǒnghwa*)” the entire society, purging or arresting thousands of public officials, politicians, professors, teachers, pastors, journalists, and students on various charges of corruption, instigation, and organization of anti-government demonstrations, and attempts at insurrection. Meanwhile, a legislature *pro tempore*, the Legislative Council for National Security passed numerous anti-democratic laws, curtailing political competition, restricting basic democratic freedoms, establishing an elaborate system of press censorship, and suppressing the labor movement.

Starting in late 1983, however, Chun’s suppression of civil society significantly abated. The authoritarian regime decided to liberalize the polity, allowing anti-government university professors and students to return to their schools, withdrawing the military police from university campuses, pardoning or rehabilitating political prisoners, and lifting the ban on political activities of hundreds of former politicians. What the government intended through these liberalization measures was to make the ruling Democratic Justice Party popular and therefore electorally competitive. The consequence of the liberalization, however, was quite different from what the regime expected – it resulted, in fact, in “the resurrection of civil society.”<sup>8</sup> Various groups in South Korean civil society, particularly those movement groups which had been decimated by the authoritarian regime’s severe repression between 1980 and 1983, were rapidly resurrected.

First of all, in February and March of 1984, university students, who had just returned to their campuses for the new academic year, restored and reorganized

anti-government student groups. In November 1984 students from 42 universities and colleges organized the National Student Coalition for Democracy Struggle (*Chõnhangnyõn*). This was the first nationwide student organization since the April Student Uprising that led to the downfall of the Syngman Rhee regime in 1960.

Second, the Korean Council for Labor Welfare (KCLW, *Han'guk nohyõp*) was organized in March 1984. Composed of various labor unions that had spearheaded anti-Yusin pro-democracy struggles in the 1970s, the KCLW tried to restore and strengthen unity and solidarity among labor movement groups. In April 1984 the *Chõnggye* apparel labor union, which had been prominent in the labor movement in the 1970s but was dissolved by the authoritarian regime in 1981, was also restored. The KCLW and *Chõnggye* jointly launched a massive campaign against the arbitrary labor laws enacted by the Legislative Council for National Security. The old student-labor alliance was resurrected, and students actively supported and cooperated with the restored labor unions. In addition, church groups such as the National Catholic Priests' Corps for the Realization of Justice (NCPCRJ, *K'atollik chõngũi kuhyõn chõn'guk sajedan*) assisted the labor movement, waging a signature campaign for the revision of objectionable labor laws.

Third, and most importantly, the resurrected student groups, youth organizations, labor unions, religious organizations, and other civil society groups were united and coordinated under the unified leadership of a national umbrella organization, the People's Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification (PMCDR, *Mint'ongnyõn*). The PMCDR, established in March 1985, encompassed not only urban labor, landless peasants, and leading intellectuals, but also most of the country's Buddhist, Protestant, and Roman Catholic clergy and lay groups.<sup>9</sup> Unlike numerous national movement associations during the 1970s, this organization was not just a group of dissident dignitaries but was quite reflective of the alliance of students, laborers, and religious leaders.

While various pro-democracy movement groups re-emerged in civil society, a genuine opposition re-emerged in political society.<sup>10</sup> Between 1980 and 1983 there was no real opposition in South Korean politics. Opposition parties such as the Democratic Korea Party (*Minhandang*) and Korean Nationalist Party (*Kungmindang*), created and controlled by the authoritarian regime, had been unable and unwilling to criticize and challenge the political legitimacy of the regime. What the authoritarian regime expected in implementing a series of liberalization measures in 1983–84 was the further fragmentation of the opposition. Contrary to the regime's expectations, however, liberalization resulted in the dramatic resuscitation and expansion of a real opposition. Many of the reinstated opposition politicians formed the New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP, *Sinhan minjudang*) in January 1985, immediately before the National Assembly elections in February.

The politics of authoritarian breakdown and democratic transition began in earnest with the formation of the NKDP and its electoral alignment with civil society groups. Many civil society groups, particularly youth and student organizations, openly supported and vigorously campaigned for the NKDP.

It was the first time since the early 1960s that university students supported a particular political party. The turnout in the National Assembly elections on February 12, 1985 was 84.6 percent, which was the highest since the 1950s. The NKDP emerged as the leading opposition, unexpectedly winning 29.26 percent of the votes, compared with 35.25 percent for the ruling Democratic Justice Party. After the elections, the strategy of the civil society groups and the NKDP was to make the legitimacy question the only and the most important political issue.<sup>11</sup> The coalition between civil society groups and the opposition NKDP outlived the National Assembly elections and later developed into a grand democracy coalition against the authoritarian regime.

Pro-democracy activities by civil society groups in South Korea during 1986–87 primarily took three different forms. First, starting in early 1986, religious activists issued a series of declarations and statements reprimanding the authoritarian regime and demanding an immediate constitutional revision. For instance, Protestant pastors argued in a statement in March 1986 that a new constitution, which would include a direct presidential election system and address basic human rights and economic equality, should be drafted immediately, and the next government should be elected according to the new constitution. Cardinal Kim Su Hwan declared in early March 1986 that “Democratization is the best way to make peace with God. The sooner the constitutional revision, the better.”<sup>12</sup> Moreover, beginning with a statement by professors at Korea University on March 28, 1986, 783 professors at 29 colleges and universities nationwide publicly announced “statements on the current situation (*Siguk sŏnŏn*),” which was an organized and peaceful nonconfidence campaign against the authoritarian regime.

Second, the opposition NKDP launched a popular campaign to collect ten million signatures nationwide in support of constitutional revision. The number – ten million – was almost half of the electorate and a quarter of the entire population of South Korea at the time. The campaign started on February 12, 1986, the first anniversary of the 1985 National Assembly elections, and rapidly spread across the country. The “size and ferocity” of the signature drive astonished the authoritarian regime.<sup>13</sup> The police carried out a series of harsh crackdowns on the signature campaign by raiding the NKDP headquarters and the offices of civil society groups and arresting numerous campaign activists. But the regime could not stem the tide of the campaign.

Third, concurrently with the signature campaign, civil society groups and the NKDP jointly sponsored and held a number of mass rallies in support of democratization. The People’s Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification and the NKDP set up the National Coalition for Democracy Movement (*Min’gun’nyŏn*) and coordinated, organized, mobilized, and led mass rallies in major cities of the country – Kwangju on March 30, Chŏngju on April 4, Taegu on April 5, Taejŏn on April 19, Inch’ŏn on May 3, Masan on May 10, and Chŏnju on May 31. Civil society groups and the opposition party were particularly encouraged by the “February Revolution” in the Philippines in which the Marcos regime was at last expelled by the “people’s power.” The number of participants

in these mass rallies exceeded 700,000 in total. Such a level of mass mobilization, except during election campaigns, was the highest since the April Uprising in 1960. The grand democracy coalition of civil society groups and the opposition party succeeded in mobilizing South Koreans from all walks of life – students, workers, peasants, urban service industry employees, religious leaders, and other citizens – under the banner of “Down with the Military Authoritarian Regime and Up with a Democratic Government.”

Two events were particularly instrumental in bolstering the power of the pro-democracy coalition and maintaining the high level of mass mobilization. First, at the dawn of 1987, Pak Chong Ch’öl, a Seoul National University student, was tortured to death during a police interrogation. The police initially announced that Pak had died of a heart attack. On May 18, however, the National Catholic Priests’ Corps for the Realization of Justice (NCPCRJ) disclosed that Pak died of police torture and that the police and the regime had attempted to conceal the fact. Pak Chong Ch’öl’s torture death and the revelation of the regime’s conspiracy to cover up the crime put the authoritarian regime and the ruling party on the defensive and dramatically augmented the position and power of the pro-democracy coalition.

Second, Chun Doo Hwan declared on April 13, 1987 that he could no longer tolerate wasteful discussions on constitutional revision. This unilateral decision to terminate the public discussions on constitutional revision intensified mass mobilization. University professors initiated a public statement campaign, criticizing and opposing Chun’s decision. Artists, novelists, writers, and actors followed suit. Religious leaders and priests waged a series of hunger strikes. Cardinal Kim Su Hwan and many religious organizations including the NCPCRJ, the National Council of Protestant Pastors for Justice and Peace, and the Korean Christian Council (*Han’guk kidokkyo hyöbühoe*) also expressed their strong opposition to the decision. Violent anti-government protests by students, labor unions, and other civil society groups spread across the country, and tens of thousands of South Koreans in major cities demonstrated against the decision.

In May 1987 civil society groups established the National Movement Headquarter for Democratic Constitution (NMHDC, *Kungmin undong ponbu*). This organization, consisting of the People’s Movement Coalition for Democracy and Reunification and 25 other major civil society groups, covered all major sectoral groups and geographical areas. Organizing and coordinating local branches throughout the country, the NMHDC mobilized a series of massive pro-democracy demonstrations against the authoritarian regime in June 1987. The mobilization escalated particularly after Yi Han Yöl, a Yonsei University student, was hit by tear gas bomb fragments on June 9 and critically injured. On June 10 the NMHDC organized the “Uprising Rally to Defeat the April 13 Decision and to End Dictatorship”. On June 26 it held the “Peace Parade” in which one million people participated nationwide. Not only the pro-democracy movement groups but also many middle-class citizens participated in these mass rallies. Pak Chong Ch’öl’s torture death and Yi Han Yöl’s injury (and later death) particularly angered middle-class citizens, because these two incidents most vividly demonstrated the immoral, illegitimate, violent, and repressive nature of the authoritarian regime.

Just like the death of high school student Kim Chu Yöl in 1960 and the death of a female labor striker, Kim Kyöng Suk, in 1979, the deaths of Pak Chong Ch'öl and Yi Han Yöl brought to the minds of ordinary citizens the image of “democratic martyr,” which has been a recurrent theme in the checkered history of South Korean democratization.

Confronted with unprecedented mass protests and mobilization, on June 29, 1987, the authoritarian regime finally announced dramatic and unexpected concessions to the demands of civil society groups and the opposition party, adopting a direct presidential election system.

### **Civil society and the democratic consolidation, 1988–**

Perhaps ironically, the presidential elections in 1987 – the result of intense popular pressure – left civil society in South Korea marginalized and fragmented. First, once the authoritarian regime agreed to carry out a set of democratic reforms including direct presidential elections, the focus of the transitional politics rapidly shifted to the “founding elections” – the presidential elections in December 1987 and the National Assembly elections in April 1988. As the founding elections were nearing, South Korean politics increasingly revolved around party politics and electoral competitions in political society. Civil society and mass mobilization became incrementally marginal. Second, after trying in vain to remedy the fatal split between the two opposition leaders, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, civil society groups took different positions on whom to support for the upcoming presidential elections. When the presidential elections ended with the ruling party’s victory, civil society groups were left deeply fragmented as a result.

However, after the inauguration of Roh Tae Woo, civil society groups remobilized themselves and resumed their pro-democracy campaign with a vigor comparable to or even stronger than that during the 1985–87 period. One of the most important reasons why civil society groups could resume their movement for democratic reform relatively quickly was the continuity of the Roh regime with the previous authoritarian regime. Roh himself did not appear to represent a clear break with the past. He could be seen as just another general-turned-president. Being a close friend of Chun Doo Hwan and deeply involved in the military coup of 1979–80 and the subsequent consolidation of the authoritarian political system, Roh had been groomed and eventually anointed as an official successor to Chun until the last minute, when the ruling bloc decided to yield to popular pressure by proclaiming the June 29 democratization package. Roh was the greatest beneficiary of the past authoritarian regime and therefore extremely constrained in terms of what he could do regarding the liquidation of the authoritarian past. To most of the movement groups that had led the “June Uprising” in 1987, the Roh regime was viewed as a mere extension of authoritarian rule. Thus civil society groups often pejoratively characterized Roh as “Chun with a wig,” likening him to the previous military ruler who was bald. At best, Roh’s regime seemed to be a liberalized authoritarianism (*dictablanda*), and the need to continue the pro-democracy struggle appeared vital.<sup>14</sup>

Furthermore, the grand party merger in 1990 offered glaring evidence that the Roh Tae Woo regime was just a continuation of the past authoritarianism and the opposition parties were unreliable. In early 1990, Roh – who, as leader of a minority party, had been seriously concerned about his political vulnerability in the National Assembly since his inauguration – succeeded in merging his ruling Democratic Justice Party with two opposition parties: the Unification Democratic Party led by Kim Young Sam and the New Democratic Republican Party led by Kim Jong Pil. The three were merged into a Democratic Liberal Party (*Minjadang*), a conservative coalition clearly modeled on Japan’s long-ruling Liberal Democratic Party, and which left Kim Dae Jung’s Democratic Party small and isolated. This was similar to transformism (*trasformismo*) in Italy where in 1876, Agostino de Pretis, the new prime minister, invited the opposition Destra Party to shift to the government majority in exchange for personal benefits, access to state patronage, and the right to local rule. The opposition parties, finding themselves marginalized from power and state spoils, agreed and “transformed” themselves from the opposition into a stable part of the governing majority.<sup>15</sup> Such Korean-style transformism was seen by many civil society groups as a frontal attack on the consolidation of democracy in their country; consequently, civil society groups had no choice but to intensify their pro-democracy movement.

It was ironically the election of Kim Young Sam in 1992, the first genuinely civilian South Korean president in more than three decades, that provided the most serious challenge to civil society and mass mobilization in South Korea. Immediately following his inauguration and particularly in the first two years of his tenure, Kim designed and carried out a series of unprecedented political and socio-economic reforms, waging intensive anti-corruption campaigns, introducing a “real name” bank system, legislating political reform bills, and consolidating the civilian control of the military.<sup>16</sup> Most of all, the Kim government’s effort to normalize relations with civil society was limited to not only pro-government or moderate groups but also radical groups in civil society. Kim’s soaring popularity left civil society groups, which had been so good at criticizing unpopular governments and so used to the repression by authoritarian regimes, bewildered, demobilized, and demoralized.<sup>17</sup> In a word, civil society groups were no longer able to find a common target. Civil society and mass mobilization appeared largely irrelevant to South Korean politics. Civil society groups, which had weathered such harsh state repression during the previous authoritarian regimes, faced their most serious identity crisis under a democratic government.

Such seeming irrelevance of civil society and mass mobilization to South Korean politics and democracy, however, did not continue very long. Civil society groups remobilized themselves and have played an extremely significant role in the politics of democratic consolidation in South Korea during the Kim Young Sam government, by pressuring the government to break with the authoritarian past, protesting the possible erosion of democracy, and pursuing new movement causes such as environmentalism.<sup>18</sup>

What was particularly instrumental in the resurgence of mass mobilization in South Korea during the Kim Young Sam government was the nationwide



controversy during 1994–95 over one of the most difficult yet important issues of the consolidational politics – the “liquidation” of the authoritarian past. Democratic consolidation is “the process in which democracy becomes so broadly and profoundly legitimate among its citizens that it is very unlikely to break down.”<sup>19</sup> Without a reasonably clean separation from the previous authoritarian regimes, it is nearly impossible for a new democratic regime to become “broadly and profoundly legitimate.” Therefore, how to deal with the authoritarian past becomes extremely crucial in either augmenting or undermining the legitimacy of a fledgling democracy.

The Kim Young Sam government was at best opportunistic regarding the issue of confronting and grappling with the authoritarian past. After a year-long investigation of the military putsch on December 12, 1979 and the Kwangju Massacre in May 1980, the government confirmed in October 1994 that Chun Doo Hwan and Roh Tae Woo were found to have engineered a military revolt. To the chagrin of most South Koreans, however, the Kim government announced in July 1995 that it would not pursue insurrection charges against Chun and Roh, because of the statute of limitations and to avoid damage to “national unity.” This announcement gave rise to a series of intense protests by many civil society groups, eventually leading to a national crisis.

Beginning with a protest declaration by the Korea Council of Professors for Democratization (*Min’gyohyöpp*) on August 14, 1995, university professors waged a nationwide signature collection campaign to demand a special law for prosecuting the coup leaders.<sup>20</sup> The disclosure of Roh Tae Woo’s corruption scandal by an opposition National Assemblyman in October 1995 dramatically escalated the level of mass mobilization. The “All-nation Emergency Committee on Enacting a Special Law for Punishing the Perpetrators of the May 18 Massacre,” established by 297 civil society groups, waged a signature collection campaign in which one million people participated. The Committee also held a “People’s Action Day” to call for the imprisonment of Roh, which 10,000 citizens and students attended.<sup>21</sup> Throughout November 1995, thousands of students, workers, movement activists, and ordinary citizens waged street demonstrations in Seoul and other major cities of the country.<sup>22</sup> Yielding to the popular pressure that had engulfed the whole nation for several months, the government finally prosecuted Chun and Roh in early 1996 on multiple charges of bribery, insurrection, and treason. Eventually, both Chun and Roh, on the recommendation of then president-elect Kim Dae Jung, were amnestied and released in December 1997. Nevertheless, the dramatic arrests and imprisonments of the two former general-turned-presidents, which had not been possible without the massive remobilization of civil society groups, immensely contributed to the consolidation of South Korean democracy by unequivocally demonstrating that a military coup would never be tolerated or justified as a viable option in South Korean politics.

Another high tide of civil society activism during the Kim Young Sam government came in late 1996. On December 26, 1996, the ruling New Korea Party (successor to the Democratic Liberal Party) passed several labor-related bills and a reform bill regarding the Agency for National Security Planning (ANSP,



*Angibu*; renamed National Intelligence Service, *Kukka chöngbowön*, in January 1999). These bills had been intensely debated and contested among South Koreans. Labor unions had opposed the proposed labor reform bills, because the bills, if legislated, would weaken labor unions and facilitate massive layoffs. Civil society groups had also disputed the proposed ANSP reform bill, because the bill would expand the investigative power of the already powerful state agency. Despite these concerns and criticisms from labor unions, civil society groups, and the opposition parties, the ruling party rammed the bills through the National Assembly, at 6 a.m. on December 26, clandestinely and without the presence of opposition legislators. This railroading of the controversial bills profoundly outraged civil society groups and led to a series of anti-government protests. Lawyers and university professors waged sit-ins and street demonstrations, demanding the immediate nullification of the bills passed. Student organizations, comparing the passage of the bills with the notorious legislation of two anti-democratic laws during the Chang Myön government in 1961, launched nationwide demonstrations. Labor unions characterized the Kim Young Sam government as a civilian dictatorship and led a series of strikes, including a successful general strike in January 1997, the first such strike since the Republic of Korea was founded in 1948. Catholic churches and organizations including the National Catholic Priests' Corps for the Realization of Justice supported the student demonstrations and labor strikes. Buddhist and protestant organizations also joined the support.<sup>23</sup> Well into mid-March, massive demonstrations and signature collection campaigns by civil society groups and labor strikes created disruption throughout the country. The government was determined to remain uncompromising, yielding nothing to the pressure engendered by such mass mobilization. Despite this, the Kim Young Sam regime ultimately lost the battle. These anti-government protests irrevocably tarnished the regime's previous democratic image, which, combined with the onset of a grave economic crisis in late 1997, made Kim Young Sam the most unpopular president in South Korean history.

Lastly, since the democratic transition in 1987, civil society groups in South Korea have explored and addressed new social issues. Particularly notable is the rapid expansion of the environmental movement in the 1990s. On April 2, 1993, the Korea Federation for Environmental Movement (KFEM), the biggest environmental movement group in South Korean history, was created. The KFEM today has 49 regional offices and more than 80,000 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 cadres or activists who carry out everyday duties of the organization are also highly educated and reform-oriented. Since its establishment, the KFEM has concentrated on a number of "focal projects" each year. Focal projects have included, for example, preserving clean water; reducing air pollution; increasing international solidarity in the anti-nuclear movement; expanding the membership and local organizations of the KFEM; enhancing environmental education; computerizing environmental information; waste

reduction; diversification of energy sources; promoting environment-friendly local politics; and educating children in environmentalism.<sup>24</sup>

The year 1997 proved a crucial year for South Korea. Beginning with the collapse of one of the *chaeböl* groups, *Hanbo*, several big business conglomerates became insolvent and fell into court receivership. Foreign banks and investors pulled their funds out of South Korea, quickly leading to a foreign exchange crisis. Despite efforts by the government and the Bank of Korea, the exchange rate and stock market plummeted, placing South Korea virtually on the brink of defaulting on its foreign debt obligations. On December 3, 1997, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) agreed to provide a \$57 billion package to South Korea, which was the largest in the IMF's history at that time. Various conditions were attached to the loans, including stringent macro-economic policies, the restructuring of the financial and corporate sectors, and rapid capital and trade liberalization.<sup>25</sup> Since the IMF bailout, South Korea, once touted as one of the "four little dragons" in East Asia, has been undergoing a serious economic restructuring.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, for the first time in South Korean history, an opposition candidate, Kim Dae Jung, was elected in the 1997 presidential elections. The fact that the opposition candidate could be elected confirmed that the presidential elections were unprecedentedly free and fair. The victory of the opposition was particularly historic because Kim Dae Jung had long been a strong supporter of democracy and human rights in South Korea.<sup>27</sup> He had been one of the most progressive politicians in South Korean politics and, for that reason, had often been labeled and suppressed as a leftist or a communist sympathizer. More significantly, Kim Dae Jung was based in the Chölla region of southwestern Korea, a region that had been systematically discriminated against throughout the entire process of industrialization under the preceding authoritarian regimes.<sup>28</sup> His election to the presidency demonstrated that a genuinely horizontal transfer of power, an important indication of democratic consolidation, had finally occurred in South Korea.<sup>29</sup>

Civil society groups continued to play a pivotal role under the Kim Dae Jung regime. To some extent, the role of civil society and mass mobilization became even more salient and crucial, primarily due to the paralysis and immobilism prevalent within South Korea's political society. From the day of his inauguration, Kim Dae Jung confronted bitter criticism and persistent hostility from the opposition Grand National Party. The National Assembly, throughout Kim Dae Jung's tenure, was characterized by frequent verbal and physical confrontations, completely lacking all the vital signs and elements of a democratic and mature legislature – communication, partnership, cooperation, compromise, constructive engagement, civility, and so forth. With such a barren and dysfunctional political society, it was once again civil society groups and their mobilization that played crucial roles in setting important national agendas and pressuring the government to carry out reforms.

The activities of civil society groups during the Kim Dae Jung government primarily focused on social reform. That civil society organizations campaigned for social reform was hardly new in South Korea. However, the breadth and

vigor of the movement were notable. Civil society groups aimed at a complete transformation and rebirth of entire South Korean society, concurrently calling for political and economic reforms. In pushing for these various reforms, civil society groups also tried to formulate and present viable policy alternatives to the state, forging and nurturing a constructive engagement with the state.

First, mobilization of civil society groups was crucial in transforming the “election climate (*sŏn’gŏ p’ungt’o*)” of South Korea. The movement for fair elections, led by the Citizens’ Council for Fair Elections (*Kongsŏnhyŏp*), had contributed considerably to increasing the overall fairness of elections. However, civil society groups realized that ensuring fair elections would not fundamentally change the mentality and behavior of South Korean politicians. Hence, in 2000, they switched to a more aggressive movement to endorse and support specific policies and candidates. On January 13, 2000, about three months before the National Assembly elections, 412 civil society groups, including the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD, *Ch’amyŏ yŏndae*) and the KFEM, established the Citizens’ Solidarity for the General Elections (CSGE, *Ch’ongsŏn yŏndae*). At its inauguration, this organization envisioned two different stages of its movement. The first was to generate a list of politicians who should not be nominated by political parties to run for the National Assembly elections (the *Nakch’ ŏn* movement). Second, if some of those “blacklisted” candidates were nominated anyway, the movement was to campaign against their actual elections (the *Naksŏn* movement).

On January 24, the CSGE disclosed a list of 66 politicians who should not be nominated as candidates for the April National Assembly elections. The selection criteria included involvement in previous bribery and corruption scandals, violation of the election laws, lack of legislative activities (e.g., too many absences in national assembly sessions), destruction of constitutional order (e.g., cooperation with Chun Doo Hwan’s authoritarian regime in the early 1980s or involvement in military coups), failure or refusal to sign anti-corruption laws, instigation of regionalism, and so on.<sup>30</sup> Various faith-based organizations, including Episcopal, Catholic, Protestant, and Buddhist organizations, publicly expressed their support for the CSGE’s *Nakch’ ŏn* and *Naksŏn* campaign, stating that they completely endorsed the movement’s objective to expel corrupt politicians from the political arena and to restore the people’s right of political participation. Furthermore, 232 members of Lawyers for Democracy (*Minbyŏn*) created a legal support team to give legal advice to the CSGE’s movement. Participating lawyers stated that the main goal of the *Nakch’ ŏn* and *Naksŏn* movement was to protect and enhance people’s constitutional right of political participation.

The CSGE announced the final *Naksŏn* list of 86 unfit candidates on April 3. The final list included 64 candidates who had been on the original *Nakch’ ŏn* list but were nominated by parties and 22 more candidates selected according to the criteria of anti-human rights backgrounds, tax evasion, inappropriate remarks and behaviors in the national assembly, and so forth. In the national assembly elections held on April 13, 2000, 59 out of 86 candidates listed by the CSGE failed to be elected. In its disintegration ceremony one week after the elections, the CSGE

made the self-assessment that its *Nakch'ŏn* and *Naksŏn* movement, in which 975 civil society groups and 1,000 activists participated in one way or another, had significantly contributed to the increase of voters' political consciousness and efficacy, to the emergence of a new generation of young politicians, and to the partial revision of election laws.<sup>31</sup>

Second, many civil society groups during the Kim Dae Jung administration strongly demanded economic reforms, particularly reforms of the *chaebŏl*. It was a widely shared consensus among South Korean civil society groups that, in contrast with the significant progress in political democratization, there had not been any notable progress in economic democratization. Economic democratization had two dimensions: the first with respect to the overall market structure and the second with respect to the internal structure of companies. In terms of the overall market structure, scholars had long pointed out that the enormous power and influence of *chaebŏl* groups had to be reduced to level the economic playing field for all economic actors. In terms of the second dimension, it had long been demanded that the internal structures of all major *chaebŏl* groups were too authoritarian, hindering managerial accountability and transparency.<sup>32</sup> These two issues of economic democratization became particularly prominent after the economic crisis in 1997, because it was believed that lack of progress in economic democratization was the essential cause of the crisis.<sup>33</sup>

Civil society groups in South Korea, especially the PSPD, concentrated on the minority shareholders movement as a specific method of achieving economic democratization. They used lawsuits and physical presence at shareholders' general meetings to promote minority shareholders' rights and to fight against the dominance of *chaebŏl* owners – chairpersons and their families. On December 12, 1997, the PSPD represented 100 minority shareholders of the First Bank (Che'il Bank) in a lawsuit to contest and annul a decision passed at the March 1997 stockholders' general meeting. The Seoul district court made a ruling in favor of the PSPD that it was unlawful for the Bank to ignore the right of expression of the minority shareholders and to proceed with revision of the statutes and election of the board members and auditors without voting.<sup>34</sup> On March 4, 1998, the PSPD submitted a proposal to revise corporate statutes to appoint external auditors, strengthen the power of the board of directors, and prevent internal transfer of funds among *chaebŏl* companies of the same group.<sup>35</sup> On September 10, 1998, the PSPD launched a campaign to acquire ownership of ten shares of stock of each of the five *chaebŏl* group companies: Samsung Electronics, SK Telecom, Daewoo, LG Semiconductors, and Hyundai Heavy Industry. After acquiring the stocks, the PSPD's plan was to inquire about the responsibility of the management and to demand effective *chaebŏl* reform.<sup>36</sup> Chang Ha Sŏng, a Korea University business professor and a leading member of the PSPD, filed class action suits against several *chaebŏl* companies on behalf of minority shareholders, charging them with mismanagement and abuse of power. Since 1999, the PSPD has been tenaciously leading a movement to hold economically powerful actors in South Korea more accountable to the law and the general public.

In the sixteenth presidential elections held on December 19, 2002, South Korean voters elected Roh Moo Hyun as their new president. Roh, who had once been a labor lawyer and human rights activist, was a political novice compared with the three Kims (i.e., Kim Dae Jung, Kim Young Sam, and Kim Jong Pil) and other seasoned party politicians in South Korea. Born in 1946, he represented a new, younger, post-liberation generation. In his political career, Roh had displayed a stubborn maverick style – principled, consistent, and strongly supportive of political and economic reform. Since Roh's election, progressives have entered the political establishment *en masse*. The successful entry of the Korea Democratic Labor Party into the National Assembly in the April 2004 elections marked the culmination of the recent ascendance of progressives in South Korea. Now, progressives, who had spearheaded the pro-democracy movement during the 1980s, are in charge of designing and implementing various crucial democratic reforms. What has been taking place during the current Roh Moo Hyun government is the gradual but unmistakable shift of power from older and conservative to younger and progressive political actors. Government agencies, civil society groups, business firms, and many major social institutions are increasingly occupied and operated by younger and progressive actors.

It is still too early to evaluate the role of civil society during the current Roh government of South Korea. But a few preliminary assessments seem possible and useful. Two elements have been conspicuous about the activities of civil society groups since 2003. First, civil society groups have been gradually expanding their issue area to include foreign policy and international relations. In 2003, for example, civil society groups waged intense nationwide protests against the Roh government's decision to send South Korean soldiers to Iraq to help the United States. The anti-war movement was facilitated by a comprehensive alliance of diverse civil society groups, politicians (especially progressive legislators in the National Assembly), and even some public officials in the government agencies such as the National Human Rights Commission. Furthermore, in waging the anti-war campaign, civil society organizations also explored and employed new movement methods, such as one-person demonstrations, candlelight vigils, lawsuits, and cyber protests.

Another foreign policy issue that has brought about significant civic activism is the South Korean government's agreement with the U.S. to relocate U.S. military bases in the cities north of Seoul such as Tongduch'ŏn and Ŭijŏngbu to those south of Seoul such as P'yŏngt'aek. On March 15, 2005, 606 residents in P'yŏngt'aek and 1,033 other citizens representing various civil society groups filed a lawsuit, arguing that the agreement between the Roh Moo Hyun government of South Korea and the Bush administration about the relocation and expansion of the U.S. military bases would seriously infringe upon their rights to ensure survival and pursue happiness and equality, as well as violating the Republic of Korea's sovereign principle to refuse a war of aggression.<sup>37</sup>

During the past authoritarian period, it was possible for a small group of elites to design and implement foreign policy, completely insulated from the public purview. Foreign policymaking was characterized by secrecy, centralization,

top-down nature, and lack of transparency. Now, after the democratic transition, South Korea's foreign policy is increasingly affected and determined by domestic politics. Because foreign policy is immensely consequential in affecting the daily lives of ordinary citizens, it is crucial to promote and institutionalize citizen participation in its making. Democracy is a political system that provides structures and procedures through which sensible foreign policies can be derived and pursued. In a democracy, elites and masses must jointly decide the goals, paths, and orientations of their foreign policies.<sup>38</sup> In this regard, it is a natural and inevitable outcome of the country's democratization that South Korean civil society groups are turning their attention to foreign policy issues.<sup>39</sup>

Second, civil society groups have challenged and opposed state-sponsored large-scale projects. Since 2001, for instance, major civil society groups including the KFEM and the PSPD have been waging protests against the government's Saeman'gŭm reclamation project. The Saeman'gŭm project began in 1991 during the Roh Tae Woo administration to reclaim land and increase water supply in the Kunsan-Pu'an area, North Ch'olla Province. From the outset, however, the project has been intensely contested and challenged by a number of civil society organizations for the possible damage it would cause to the surrounding environment. In response to the protracted and ever-intensifying protest activities by civil society groups, the Seoul administrative court in the end decided on February 4, 2005 that the mega-project, with 85 percent of the construction already completed, should either be cancelled altogether or significantly changed due to its potential environmental, ecological, and financial harm to the region and the residents.<sup>40</sup>

Another state-sponsored mega-project that has been acutely contested, challenged, and opposed by civil society groups in South Korea is the plan to locate and build a nuclear waste dump site. When the county chief of Pu'an, North Ch'olla, without adequate consultation with residents, submitted an application to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry, and Energy in July 2003 to invite a nuclear waste dump site, various environmental groups in the area and the vicinity launched an intensive anti-nuclear campaign against the action. Faced with a series of violent demonstrations by residents and environmental organizations, the plan to locate the nuclear waste site in Pu'an was completely abandoned. The Roh government instead pledged to make the policymaking more transparent and democratic, incorporating sufficient input from the local residents themselves. The site was finally decided through a direct popular referendum in four competing cities in November 2005. As a result of the vote, Kyŏngju was selected as the site for a nuclear recycling center.<sup>41</sup>

Both the Saeman'gŭm and Pu'an incidents demonstrate that civil society groups in South Korea are now focusing their energy more on making the policymaking process more transparent and accessible. State-sponsored mega-projects, which in the past during the authoritarian regimes were carried out without any significant supervision by civil society, are now under the close surveillance and scrutiny of able and vigilant civil society groups and ordinary citizens. As a result, the

policymaking process in South Korea is becoming increasingly democratic and accountable.

## **Conclusion**

As far as South Korea is concerned, the answer to the debate on elites vs. masses in the literature on democratization seems clear. As I have shown in this chapter, civil society and its mobilization were crucial in the democratic transition and consolidation of South Korea. Mass-ascendance characterized South Korea's democratic transition. During the transition, it was the resurrection and remobilization of various civil society groups and their grand pro-democracy coalition with the opposition party that ultimately induced the authoritarian ruling regime to agree on a set of democratic reforms. In this respect, during what Rustow calls the "prolonged struggle," critical choices were made among the mass public and in its interaction with elites.<sup>42</sup>

What is even more remarkable in the case of South Korea is the continued importance of civil society and mass mobilization in the period of democratic consolidation. It is generally agreed in the existing literature that civil society is demobilized – and therefore the role of civil society becomes significantly marginalized – in the consolidational phase.<sup>43</sup> As Tarrow observes, "elite choices appear to predominate at the consolidation phase of newly emerging democracies."<sup>44</sup> But in the case of South Korea, even during the democratic consolidation, civil society and mass mobilization have played crucial roles in pressuring the democratic regimes to continue and deepen political, economic, and social reforms and to make the policymaking process more transparent and accessible. Civil society in South Korea, in brief, continues to serve as the main driving force for social transformation. In this regard, Dryzek's observation is perfectly applicable to South Korea: "pressures for greater democracy almost always emanate from oppositional civil society, rarely or never from the state itself."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, in the epic of South Korean democratization, the elites rumble in the wings, if not actively sabotaging the whole drama; the actors on the stage are civil society groups and the mass public.<sup>46</sup>

In the last analysis, however, as Schmitter cautions us, civil society and its continued activism is "not an unmitigated blessing for democracy."<sup>47</sup> In one very crucial aspect, the fundamental political dynamics under both the previous Kim Dae Jung regime and the current Roh Moo Hyun regime are surprisingly similar to those under the previous authoritarian regimes. That is to say, political society is sharply dichotomized between the ruling and the opposition parties, entirely wanting in compromise, cooperation, civility, courtesy, and constructive interactions. Bypassing such a polarized and petrified political society, the principal focus of politics continues to consist in the direct – sometimes conflictual, sometimes cooperative – interactions between the state and civil society. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this close interaction and engagement between the state and civil society. However, if this direct engagement between the state and civil society keeps on circumventing and ultimately *replaces* party politics,



this may pose a threat to the consolidation of South Korean democracy. Virtually all the existing consolidated democracies in the contemporary world are predicated on the balance of two elements – vibrant civil society and functional political society. This balance between a strong civil society and a strong political society serves as an antidote to the abuse of power by the state. Therefore, as long as the imbalance between an energetic civil society and a lethargic political society drags on, South Korean democracy will be most likely to remain uninstitutionalized, unconsolidated, unstable, and fragile.

## Notes

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- 5 Sidney Tarrow, “Mass Mobilization and Regime Change: Pacts, Reform, and Popular Power in Italy (1918–22) and Spain (1975–78),” in Richard Gunther, P. Nikiforos Diamandouros, and Hans-Jürgen Puhle, eds., *The Politics of Democratic Consolidation: Southern Europe in Comparative Perspective* (Baltimore: Johns

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