Civil Society and Democracy in East Asia with Special Reference to South Korea

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to construct a case for a distinctively South Korean approach to civil society and democracy. The end of military rule and emergence of democracy in South Korea in the late 1980s and early 1990s can be seen as part of a global surge of democratization called the ‘Third Wave’ of democracy. The aim of this paper is to review how the concept of civil society has been used in East Asia with special reference to South Korea’s democratic transition. What resource and capacity challenges do they face today? The study aims to analyze the development pattern and the character of civil society that has emerged and is different from the Western European pattern. For South Korean democracy to consolidate, civil society should gradually move from an organization of anti-government forces to a consolidated, organized and well-defined interest group. The State should pledge to develop initiatives that support civil society and strengthen governments committed to democracy.

Keywords: Civil Society, Social Movements, Democracy, East Asia, South Korea.

Civil society is generally accepted as a concept for promoting democracy and achieving a good society. Civil society is ‘civil’ because it carries a basic normative component i.e., respect
for other groups’ autonomy. Hence the practice of ‘civility’ is a necessary component of civil society.\(^1\) And this necessarily inclines civil society toward support for a pluralistic and democratic policy, a policy that respects diversity and responds to local voices.\(^2\) The notion of civil society, an analytic, normative and political concept is rooted in the early experiences of Western Europe. Its importance in advancing peace efforts generated increased and wide interest after the cold war. The popularity of the concept, however, is not restricted to countries with a European historical background. The concept is used in East Asia as well which has very different history, culture and tradition. In East Asia, the notion of civil society has great appeal and is used frequently by the experts on Korean development to interpret the recent political transition to democracy. The question arises does the advent of a democratic regime also affect the role of civil society during the consolidation of democracy. The purpose of this paper is to review how the concept of civil society has been used in East Asia in the context of South Korea. It spells out the possible role of civil society in peace building, while at the same time problematizing the civil-society concept and pointing to the problems regarding resource and capacity challenges faced by civil society in taking on this role. It throws light on how civil society changes and adapts in a new democracy. The paper attempts to address these questions in theoretical and contextual perspectives as the study demands an understanding of the concept in both theoretical and empirical framework.

In order to address such research questions, the paper analyses the case of South Korea with a focus on how civil society has reshaped itself during the phase of democratic consolidation. A particular emphasis is put on the changing relationship with the new democratic governments since the early 1990s until now. First section of the paper investigates the theoretical approaches as well as the relationship between civil society and the recent wave of
democratization in East Asia. These concepts are intended as an analytical framework to be applied to South Korea. The next section deals with origin of civil society and its reconstruction. Beginning with a synoptic overview of the historical evolution of South Korean civil society, the paper also analyzes the impact of 'privatisation and liberalisation', the relationship between social economy and civil society. The next section examines the development pattern and the character of civil society in East Asia that has emerged and is different from the Western European pattern. In the following section the study deals with the relationship between Civil Society and Democratization. Further, the study focuses on achievements, challenges and reforms in the Civil Society in South Korea. In conclusion, the paper discovers the political role played by civil society in facilitating or impeding democratization.

Theoretical Approaches to Civil Society in Relationship with Democracy

In contemporary political science, the notion of civil society has remained vague and subject to diverse interpretations. Most scholars and practitioners do not view civil society as a diverse aggregation of individuals, movements and associations, but they understand civil society as represented by formal organizations sharing similar values and goals. Its meaning gets complicated since it is a new phenomenon to rename as civil society to those associations which were conceptually dealt with distinct meaning as interest groups, pressure groups, professional groups, etc. during 1960s and 1970s. There are various approaches to civil society in its relationship with democracy. According to theory of democratization, civil society is an important force in bringing about political change. Civil society is a public space between state and citizens. It does not mean all types of intermediary institutions between state and citizens are civil society. The notion of civil society varies in different parts of the world. In the West, civil
society is a means of rejuvenating public life; in the East, it means – besides political and civil liberties – private property rights and markets; and in the South, it refers to those forces and agents which oppose the state and its efforts at regulation. The writings on the origin and evolution of civil society in the West, i.e. John Locke’s ‘civil state’, Hegel’s ‘ethical life’ and De Tocqueville’s ‘associational life’ loosely incorporated all types of citizens’ groups in the platform of civil society. Theorists of social capital, i.e. James Coleman and Robert Putnam broadened the boundary of civil society. The civil society provides a breeding ground for democratic values as it contributes to the strengthening of mutual trust and horizontal linkages (that is, social capital) within a given society. Another approach, associated with liberalism, holds that civil society is the vehicle through which organized citizens can challenge the authoritarian state in order to widen bottom-up participation and protect civil and political rights. Hegel, views civil society as an instrument of the state, a vehicle of cultural permeation replicating the order imposed by the state throughout society, rather than an independent actor. For Marxists, civil society is an outcome of transformation of state and society from feudal to capitalist world. Civil society did not exist in feudalism. Karl Marx focuses on the economic sphere as the reason for the emergence of civil society, which reinforces the societal control exerted by the bourgeoisie. Within this framework, Antonio Gramsci acknowledges that civil society might become the acquiescent support of capitalist power, but he nonetheless believes that it can also bring about political change by elaborating and propagating a new conception of the world. A strong civil society entails: the existence of rule of law conditions that effectively protect citizens from state arbitrariness, the existence of strongly organized non-state groups, capable of checking eventual abuse of power by those who control the means of administration
and coercion, and the existence of balanced pluralism among civil society interests so that none can establish absolute dominance.⁷

Samuel P. Huntington defined the period of global politics since 1974 as the “third wave” of global democratization. It has seen the most sweeping transformation in the way that states are governed in the history of human civilization. During this period, democracy has gone from being a preserve of the West to a global phenomenon. It became the most common form of government in the world. The return of civil society to political vocabularies has in part been the result of neo-liberal projects such as privatization, de-nationalization, deregulation and de-stabilization which seek to roll back the state.⁸ Rediscovery of civil society is associated with the ‘third wave” of democracy in Asia, Africa and Latin America. East Asia has gone from being the “developmental authoritarianism” to a mix set of systems. Seven of the region’s seventeen states are democracies: Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Mangolia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and East Timor. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan rank among the stable liberal democracies of the industrialized world. In much of East Asia, citizens have a low opinion of parties, politicians, and parliaments; they do not prefer to live under, authoritarianism.⁹ The struggles for democracy in different East Asian countries have thus been an integral part of world movements toward democracy. If we place South Korea along a regime spectrum, with authoritarian and advanced democracy on two ends of the spectrum, and “electoral democracy” and “liberal democracy” respectively between the two extremes, Korea will probably be somewhere between electoral democracy and liberal democracy or “polyarchy”.¹⁰ In other words, from a non-maximalist stance, South Korea can be regarded as a member of the family of democracies. Today democracy in South Korea operates more successfully than in any other Third World country.
Origin of Civil Society and its Reconstruction

There is a debate on whether or not South Korea can be said to have a civil society. Due to conceptual ambiguities it is not easy to outline the boundaries of the contemporary nonprofit sector in South Korea. Historically there has been no obvious distinction between the state and civil society. In South Korea, civil society exists as a forum in the sense of a non-state arena. Civil society in the sense of associational groups is not developed. Before 1945, Kinship or village-based voluntary organizations dominated over any emergence of an independent civil society. Even though the rural gentry class had formed their own autonomous social boundaries, ordinary people could not form any kind of “civil” organizations, with the exception of self-help organizations. After the Korean War of 1950-53, the South Korean state became repressive and undemocratic. Shortly after the liberation there were strong labor and peasant movements that resisted military rule by the United States and the right. Consequently, the revolutionary movement broke out in April 1960 when students and intellectuals revolted against the undemocratic state. South Korea achieved rapid industrialization and growth of the economy in the past four decades, resulting in the differentiation of society accompanied by an expansion of the middle class. It is thus assumed that Republic of Korea's civil society grew as a consequence of the vigorous market economy and the expansion of the middle classes, in 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. Conflict and confrontation between a repressive state and an oppositional civil society characterized South Korea’s democratic transition from 1985 to 1987. Political society and civil society which had been repressed by authoritarian rule under the dictatorial regimes were normalized due to
democratization. Civil society regained autonomy and developed rapidly afterwards. The advent of democracy brought deep transformation in civil society, not only from a structural point of view, but also in its strategic options, policy goals and relationship with the state. Sunhyuk Kim's study of democratization in South Korea argues that the momentum for political change in Korea has consistently emanated from oppositional civil society rather than from the state. One of the first systematic attempts to apply a civil society framework to a democratizing country in East Asia, *Politics of Democratization in Korea: The Role of Civil Society*, Kim presents a widely accepted view 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." Many political groups and social movements appeared in the changing Korean society. During the phase of democratic consolidation, civil society organizations revised their main goals and approaches by focusing on transparency in public ethics.

There are several major terms used to refer to the organizations that are nonprofit or tax exempt voluntary organizations in South Korea. These terms include: NPOs (beyoungri danche), NGOs (mingan danche), civil society organizations (simin danche), civic movement organizations (simin woondong danche), and public interest corporations (gongick bubin). They are not clearly defined and are frequently used interchangeably. The terms “NGOs” and “civil society organizations” (CSOs) are the most popular in the field of academics and journalism.

Activities of civil society organizations can be classified into different categories. Advocacy-oriented activities involved dissident intellectuals and students who demanded a reduction in the state’s discretionary power. This movement aimed for the promotion of social
justice, democracy, and human rights on behalf of the workers, peasants, and other alienated people in society. Underground student activities and political opposition groups such as organizations of Youth Association for Democratization Movement (Minchungryun) established in 1983 and Association for Progress of Democratization (Minchuhyup) established in 1984. These activities had been severely oppressed by the state. Education and service-oriented organizations such as the Asan Foundation (1977) and Samsung Welfare Foundation (1989) had a nonpolitical character and played a significant role in providing public goods and social services. Quasi-governmental organizations such as the Saemaul Movement functioned as governmental agencies. These pro-government organizations played a significant role in mobilizing people for national development or in publicizing government’s policies. In this period independent civil activities in South Korea could develop only within a limited political space. From the early 1980s popular support for various civic groups such as women’s groups, consumer advocacy groups, and environmental activities grew with the emergence of a middle class. Discrepancies began to prevail in every aspect of society: between city and country, between classes, between regions etc. Corruption was widespread in the government and among political elites. Rapid industrialization and urbanization, differentiation of class structure, and the growth of the middle class represent the preconditions for the awareness of the problems of the authoritarian regimes.

There were popular organizations and substantial funding available when the democratic transition in 1985-87 occurred. Some advocacy civil organizations such as Lawyers for a Democratic Society, the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), and the Citizen’s Coalition of Economic Justice (CCEJ) grew. During this period diverse elements in South Korean civil society rapidly mobilized into a militant pro-democracy force, and waged
intense struggles against the authoritarian regime. However, the rise of people’s movements had already begun to play an important role in the mid-1980s. The dramatic rise of citizens and labor movements and nongovernmental organizations during the late 1980s and early 1990s was due to the rapid democratization beginning in the mid-1980s. At this stage of evolution of the South Korean civil society was the emergence of increasingly effective civic groups led by younger generations. They emphasized progressive advocacy functions including efforts to broaden public debate and participation in the formulation of public policy, safeguard or expand the domain of human rights, and safeguard the environment from the pressures of economic growth.

The immediate post-democratization period between the late 1980s and the early 1990s has added important dimensions since the traditional leader groups, such as student organizations and underground groups were gradually replaced by new civil organizations.

Many scholars say that the decade of the 1990s in South Korea was “the age of civil society.” According to the Korean NGO Times (2001), 56.5% of all civil society organizations (CSOs) are established in the 1990s and 21% in the 1980s while only 9% were created in the 1970s. This indicates several distinct evolutions. The South Korean nonprofit sector has grown into a visible and independent entity in relation to the state and business. It has been understood as an institutionalized and self-generating reality capable of pressing bureaucrats, politicians, and businessmen. The South Korean nonprofit sector has been internally differentiated which contributes to the development of the nonprofit sector itself and to social and political pluralism. Academic as well as journalistic interest in the nonprofit sector has been growing. Public awareness and support are also important developments. Along with the spectacular growth of its economy, the role of nonprofit and nongovernmental sector in South Korea has grown substantially over the last thirty years. As of 1997, the nonprofit sector accounted for 2.96% of
gross domestic products or 5.6% of domestic service goods produced in South Korea.\textsuperscript{12} Citizen groups primarily led anti-corruption movement in the 1990s. They played a crucial role in proposing policy and legal reforms such as “freedom of information act”, “administrative procedure act” and comprehensive “anti corruption law”. In addition, advocacy organizations play critical roles in the policy deliberation process while service organizations including health and welfare agencies have played indispensable roles in the provision of social welfare and health care services. Another important characteristic of the South Korea civil society is its relative youth.

Government policy towards civil advocacy organizations greatly changed after the launching of Kim Yong-sam’s government in early 1990s. Previously the general attitude of the government towards civil society organizations was negative because of most civil society organization's habit to criticize governmental policy. Citizen groups played a vital role as a watchdog for national election campaign monitoring and national budget monitoring. Citizens group worked closely with the government when the latter showed willingness to work together. Now the relationship between the government and civil society sector has become complementary. For example, in 1999 the Korean National Assembly passed 'An Act for the Support of Private Nonprofit Organizations' which enables the government to help third sector organizations. The constitutional right to freely associate and assemble is guaranteed in Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea. Specifically, the formation of NPOs is governed by Article 32 of the Civil Code: "An association or foundation relating to science, religion, charity, art, or social intercourse or otherwise relating to enterprises not engaged for profit or gain may be made a legal person subject to the permission of the relevant ministries." Non-
governmental organizations are primarily an agent of development though some of them occasionally undertake civil society’s role particularly in awareness and advocacy campaigns.

To South Korea, it is the political cleavages and conflicts manifested in political party struggles that the Korean new democratic governments since 1998 had hard time to deal with. The government and political parties lacked either political will or effective anti-corruption strategy. South Korean society is confronted with serious regional disparities and social conflicts. So, civil society’s pressure, proposal for legal and policy reforms, and monitoring the government have been indispensable. Citizen movement groups such as Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice and People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy were different from anti-dictatorship movement groups. Thus citizen groups rapidly expanded and their political influence grew rapidly in the 1990s. “Citizen Movement” became very popular among the people. Environmental groups, women’s groups, consumer groups, and many other civic groups in the areas of political reform, human rights, reunification and anti-corruption grew exponentially.

East Asian Model Different from Western Model

Many supporters of the Asian values (used in general term) hold that liberal democracy is an acceptable institutional design even though the Asian culture is significantly different from the Western culture. The proponents of Asian values, such as Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohamed, argue that there is a set of core values which is distinctively Asian and which entails a political-social practice other than the Western style of liberal democracy. Amartya Sen argues that certain "selected components" of basic notions -- such as individual liberty, authority, and social order are discernible both in the East and the West tradition. Bell argues that the political development in East and Southeast Asia is quite different from the pattern that liberal democracy
emerged in the West. Whereas the Western experience of "democratization" emerged as a response to a growing demand for autonomy on the part of groups and classes in civil society, the dominant and intrusive role of state power in most aspects of East and Southeast Asian social life channels political change to serve the managerial and technocratic ends of the state. Bell and his colleagues maintain that an illiberal model of democracy has actually emerged out of the East Asia context. The prominent features of the model include: (1) a non-neutral understanding of the state, which means the government will forcefully impose what it regard as indispensable to a good life upon all citizen; (2) the evolution of a rationalistic and legalistic technocracy that manages the state as a corporate enterprise; and (3) the development of a well-controlled rather than an energetic and critical public space and civil society. This model is not the only possibility of communitarian politics, but it is the one that advocators of Asian values would recommend for the people of East Asia.

In the words of a Chinese political scientist, “The lines between public and private, political and personal, formal and informal, official and non-official, government and market, legal and customary and between procedural and substantial are all blurred”. This pattern of state–society relations can be found in perhaps all East Asian states. It is a feature that sets them apart from the West. The East Asian social model is characterized, on the one hand, by relatively low state involvement in welfare provision, in comparison with the EU, and, on the other, relatively high involvement of non-state providers: the family, civil society (NGOs, associations), employers and so on. The terms civil society and public sphere grow from a Western perspective. In East Asia, the creation of civil society is a crucial yet most difficult issue. Europeans were characterised by weak governments for centuries in which the foundation institutions, norms and values of civil society could develop. East Asia, faces this task in a
particular situation. For instance, when a nation's currency can devalue, destabilising its government, and when states have more effective means of suppression and exploitation. East Asian societies are characterised by different mixtures of Confucian, Buddhist, Western and other values. In South Korea, “Even those who identified themselves as Christians and adhered to Christian values and practices” were very much inclined to confucian values and practices as well.18

Government officials and leaders in Japan and other East Asian societies draw their notions of proper governance from a quite different Eastern perspective rooted in Confucianism. In the Confucian viewpoint, government, political and business leaders look upon manifestations of civil society and the public sphere with inherent suspicion and distrust. They tend to consider protest as emotional, irrational and serving little purpose. Of course, disparagement of mass participation in governance is not limited to neo-Confucian elites. In the West, it started with Aristotle's distrust of the "demos," and has continued in conservative thinking to the present.19 In the 1960s and 1970s, conservative Western leaders similarly disparaged protest movements. Up to that time, even social theory echoed that disparagement.20 However, conservative Western leaders and theorists worked against core Western values of individual rights. Leaders in neo-Confucian societies like Japan, find justification for state paternalism in still prevalent ethics derived from long historical practice and ideology, as the Tokugawa motto "respect the bureaucrats and despise the people" (kanson minpi) illustrates. In traditional and neo-Confucian perspectives, government leaders should be respected, shielded from popular demands, and given a relatively free hand to govern.21 In sociological terms, the role of government leaders toward society is to paternalistically temper and balance the competing interests of groups in society toward goals functional for the entire society. In terms of environmental or other social
problems, the Confucian perspective implies that the state will take care of the problem adequately without much need for even institutionalized democratic citizen input through voting.

East Asian countries are recognizably democratic yet significantly different from western models. East Asian democracy is less liberal than the European model. East Asia is still predominantly authoritarian in marked contrast to Eastern Europe. There has been a swift movement toward democratic régimes in Asia though several countries, especially in East Asia, have continued to resist the democratizing trend. The banner of 'civil society' has been raised in recent years by social movements, in East Asia as much as in Eastern Europe, seeking to push their societies from authoritarianism to democracy. There has been little change in the levels of political rights and civil liberties in East Asia’s autocracies over the last few years. State influence and driving forces linked to public policies make these models different from the US model; as for the role of civil society, it seems weaker than in Western contexts but is growing significantly. The meanings and priorities East Asians attach to a set of political standards have been shaped by the Western experience. Set of human rights are valued, at least in theory, by all governments in the contemporary world. Both sides of the world should debate on values and learn from the other side as to how collective values are to be understood, and how a democratic system should be improved. It should reflect upon the shortcomings as well as the strength of one's system.

**Civil Society and Democratization**

It is generally believed that civil society has an important role to play in consolidating democracy and its resistance against the state helps in making political society accountable to citizens and societies. The question is how can civil society contribute for the consolidation of
democracy in the emerging democracies? How is the civil society contributing to promote people’s participation in governance? Does the global character of twenty first century civil society help or hinder democracy? J.S Mill argues that democracy can contribute to public spiritedness. Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in democratic change, and an intermediary between citizens and the state. The stage of political development often determines the access of citizens to political institutions and in turn the need for Civil Society Organizations as intermediaries for mobilization against the state. Schmitter listed that it stabilizes expectations within social groups; inculcates conceptions of interest and norms of behaviour that are civic; it provides channels for self-expression; serves to govern the behaviour of its members with regard to collective commitments; and provides important reservoirs of resistance to arbitrary action by rulers. Whether civil societies of newly established democracies are functioning in conformity to such checklists is questionable. But the way it revived in the East as resistance movements against authoritarian regimes suggests that civil society is an ally of democracy. They also maintain a considerable level of autonomy and independence from the state and market. People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy, established in 1994 and Citizen's Coalition for Economic Justice established in 1989 are the most famous civil movement organizations. Civil Society determines modernity and social progress. The 21st century has seen enormous shifts in power balances with national security agenda dominating international relations and development assistance, the rise of Asia in the arena of global economic development, new form of global governance, and citizens' movements across different regions demanding democratic freedoms. As a result, the civil society perspective based on values of solidarity, equity and inclusion finds itself under increasing pressure.

The concept of developmental state has been widely used with reference to East Asian
countries in international political economy to describe governments that have adopted a proactive and strong involvement in the national economy through direct state intervention, state regulation and planning. In the democratization of Asian countries, notably South Korea, Indonesia, Philippines and Thailand, the role of elites’ was pre-eminent. It would not have been achieved without the active participation of civil society organizations. They generated political pressure for reform, leading to the liberalization of political systems and eventually bringing down dictatorial regimes.

Democracies in Indonesia, the Philippines, South Korea and Thailand are still weak, vulnerable and inefficient. Many interest groups are loosely organized there and unable to articulate their interests. They need to be strengthened and consolidated. South Korea managed to secure high level of sustained economic growth. South Korea may be defined as liberal democracy. There is a civil society perspective in the South Korean economy. The Korean experiment with democracy started with a series of relaxation measures by the ruling authoritarian regime in late 1983 and early 1984. The direct consequence of the 1983-1984 political liberalization was a resurrection.

In the emerging democracies, one of the challenges facing them is how to make democratic consolidation possible. Political parties, social movements, civil society organizations, interest groups, and other social organizations all play an important role in strengthening and deepening democracy. They can serve as a mechanism for political participation and mobilization, disseminating democratic principles and norms. Democracy is consolidated when a reversal to authoritarianism is impossible. Democracy is consolidated when it is made stable, vibrant, efficient and accountable. It is a complex process and the factors contributing to democratic consolidation include structural and cultural dimensions. Commitment to democracy among the
elites (decision-makers, organizational leaders, politicians, government officials, intellectuals, leaders in the private sector) is an essential condition for consolidating democracy. However, democracy cannot take hold if the elites are not committed to democracy. Democracy is consolidated when a majority of the people believes that democracy is the best form of government for their progress. In emerging democracies, this belief is not firmly entrenched in the public mind. As a result, some groups are often encouraged and manipulated into using violence or other non-democratic methods in fighting for their cause.\textsuperscript{23}

Civil society organizations can help consolidate democracy in a number of ways. These organizations consolidate democracy by stimulating political participation. They can supplement the role of political parties in encouraging people to get involved in politics, especially as voters in elections. Political participation strengthens the legitimacy and the institutionalization of democratic government. Thus, Civil-society organizations in many democracies perform the function of representing the interests and asserting the rights and power of the people. As Diamond points out, civil society can play a role in checking, monitoring and restraining the exercise of power by the state and holding it accountable. This function can reduce political corruption, which is pervasive in emerging democracies. It can force the government to be more accountable, transparent, and responsive to the public, which strengthens its legitimacy. Civil society organizations can play a vital role in making the elites and the mass public more committed to democracy by disseminating democratic principles and ideas. Organizations that are involved specifically in the protection of civil rights and freedoms, as well as political reform, can be important in this regard.

Civil-society organizations can come in and help interest groups and people to fight more effectively for their interests, and hence empowering them. Civil-society organizations can train
political leaders. Those who are involved in the activities of such groups learn how to organize and motivate people, publicize programs and reconcile conflicts. This teaches people to deal efficiently with political challenges. In South Korea, the role of civil society in fostering democratic transition was reflected in a series of student and worker demonstrations against authoritarian rule and demanding liberalization and democratization during the latter part of the 1980s. The middle class also exerted strong pressure for true democratic change. The strength of the middle class, students and workers was the result of South Korean success in economic development and industrialization. After a long period of economic growth, the attitudes of the middle class, labor, and civil society groups became less tolerant of repressive rule. The mobilization of a civil society coalition of student and labor organizations, journalists, writers, academics, religious groups, and peasants against the authoritarian regime of Chun Doo-hwan weakened his rule. The government responded with further repression, resulting in an explosion of labor and student unrest. These events gave Chun no choice except to comply with the public demands to establish full democracy with direct election of the president.24 In the case of South Korea, the economic crisis of 1997 accelerated the democratic transformation in the sense that the authoritarian developmental state was put under scrutiny and the government monopoly of the public cause was challenged. Civil-society organizations became recognized as a “third power” when the crisis of 1997 destroyed middle-class confidence in political leadership, causing civic groups to become stronger and more critical of the establishment. Transition to democracy is complex and unpredictable wherein final outcome cannot be predicted. However, the pathways of democracy in the post-authoritarian period can be delineated by taking into account the transition to democracy. The South Korean case shows that transition to democracy by transaction and other political factors led to the establishment of limited democracy and the
development of the contentious politics that culminated in the impeachment of President Roh Moo-Hyun in 2004.

**Achievements, Challenges and Reforms in the Civil Society**

Civil society has contributed a lot to reforms for anti-corruption as well as for other political and economic reforms in South Korea. South Korea proposed and reached an agreement to create a council and a special fund to combat corruption among the 35 countries in the Asia-Pacific Region in the Seoul Conference on combating Corruption in the Asia-Pacific Region, which was held from 11 to 13 December 2000. Korea also hosted both the Global Forum III and the 11th International Anti-Corruption Conference in 2003.  

CIVICUS Civil Society index findings from the 2008-2011 phase report that 48% of CSO representatives in 25 geographically and politically diverse countries believe that the laws in their country are ‘highly restrictive’ or ‘quite limiting’ for civil society activities. The negative consequences on fundamental freedoms, including the rights of civil society actors, have been devastating as many governments have used the element of fear to dilute civil liberties, lower fair trial standards and restrict the free movement of people across borders. Moreover, the ability of citizens and civil society organizations to express democratic dissent has been severely curtailed through a clampdown on the freedoms of expression, association and assembly. A number of democracies have slashed public spending for civil society groups as punishment for challenging their policies. Attacks and torture of family members make civil society activism a highly risky endeavour. In many cases, civil society members have been targeted for assassination by both state and non-state actors. Brutal crackdowns on peaceful assemblies are another major area of concern being employed by security forces to suppress calls for greater democratic freedoms. In
September 2010, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay, made an appeal to the UN Human Rights Council to take action to address the global trend of restriction on civil society space. On 10 December 2010, the UN Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, in acknowledging these negative trends, dedicated the observance of International Human Rights Day to human rights defenders who continue their work despite the multiple risks being faced by them. He emphasised that states bear the primary responsibility to protect human rights advocates.

There are various factors that are essential to the problematic of Civil Society Organization’s role in democratic change. Civil society organizations in South Korean society are the most influential and autonomous sub-sector within the Korean non-profit sector. Major civil society organizations have equipped themselves with research institutes and policy commissions to strengthen their policy-presenting capacity. At the same time it is not easy to outline the boundaries of the contemporary non-profit sector in South Korea. A high occurrence of unregistered status is a distinctive feature of South Korean civil society. There are huge disparities in the counts of registered and unregistered civil society organizations. Among the major civic anti-corruption organizations, only TI Korea and the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice have codes of conduct, while others simply have their personnel committees to handle issues related to conflicts of interest of members. Theorist Choi Jang Jip stated that not only was South Korean politics elite-dominated but political opposition was near impossible.27 Sanmook Lee declared that the government’s failure to institutionalize “democratic norms or rules in terms of political society, civil society, economic society, and the state apparatus” made it “difficult to say that Korean democracy has officially consolidated.28
During the presidential election in 1992, Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) launched an active issue advocacy campaign. It published a book titled *Let Us Change Our Society: Reform Proposals for Economic Justice*, which contained 54 reform agendas. It urged the major presidential candidates to adopt its proposals. South Korea’s democracy withstood a huge shock with the National Assembly’s impeachment of President Roh Moo Hyun I in 2004. The ensuing political crisis tested the nation’s resolve to abide by the constitution. The general election in 2004 reflected new social cleavage and new social trends that developed in the information society. The future of democracy in South Korea thus depends on the impact of social change on party politics. However, it is hard to expect that the future of Korean democracy will be fully exempt from the authoritarian legacy since political leaders and political parties have not been accountable to the people after the election.

People working for Civil Society Organizations are generally believed to be conscientious and competent with regard to monitoring corruption. They are not assumed to be corrupt themselves. They demand integrity and good governance of public institutions and the business sector. They have drawn little attention to their own internal governance and integrity systems. CSOs’ accountability is generally towards the public, but also towards their members. They set up annual general meetings and executive committees conduct annual audits. Yet, it is difficult to generalize about the status of accountability and governance practices in civil society organization. It is also argued that South Korean civil society organization drift away from their initial goal, failing to listen to their members and thus making them organizations that are ‘citizens’ groups without citizens’. Civil society organizations, including those fighting against corruption, mostly disclose information on their organization and job performance on their home pages. Publicly available information includes articles of incorporation, other internal laws,
major activities, goals, budget and expenses. Some CSOs, do not disclose their financial information to the public. No public information exists regarding the number of CSOs that have set up their own ethics codes.

There are various kinds of restrictions on civil society. A number of officials including heads of government and state have made highly critical pronouncements about the positioning and role of CSOs which are having severely negative consequences. Negative global trends began after 9/11 as many governments have encroached on fundamental freedoms through harsh security measures. UN Security Council Resolution 1373 called on all UN member states to take concrete steps to tackle terrorism. The intention behind the resolution to protect civilians and state structures from acts of terrorism has been sound. Officials and law makers in established democracies, emerging democracies and in authoritarian countries have curbed the ability of CSOs to ensure transparency, accountability and respect for human rights in the public sphere. The first decade of the 21st century has been particularly hard for civil society organizations. While civic movement and labor movement have been key actors in challenging conservative politics, the political influence of voters via Internet have begun to play an important role in affecting the party politics. A major area of concern is the introduction of laws to regulate civil society activities, including the ability to establish organizations freely, carry out regular functions without official interference and obtain funding from abroad. A much more difficult challenge seems to be the reform of political financing. There is a challenge in getting civil society back on track.

Major economic and political upheavals of the past decade have transformed the entire discourse on the role of civil society. Contemporary civil society is global. Analysis about the relevant transformations brings about trend which includes mode of cooptation, changing
forms of mobilization and new socio-political strategies. The constitution of a strong middle-class civil society in South Korea is an achievement. Civil society works in peace building. There is need to assess civil society support in community development. Focus should also be on the political dimensions of democracy. Anti-Corruption and transparency should be implemented. Link between civic virtue and checks against political corruption should be applied. For South Korean democracy to consolidate, civil society should be moving from an assemblage of anti-government forces to a tightly organized and well-defined interest group society. To implement the above principles in making the civil society a living reality, state should focus on alliance building, information sharing and coordinate across borders and between different sections of civil society. Instead of co-opting the civil society and restrict its autonomy, state can provide assistance to civil-society organizations to perform their functions more effectively. This assistance should be in form of financial support and training of personnel. Through these efforts, governments can become more accountable and responsive to the people’s needs, and the mass public will be more committed to democracy. Although many reform proposals of civil society have been adopted and implemented by the government and relationship between the civil society and government has developed, South Korea still has the long way to go against corruption. Korea ranked 48th out of 90 countries in the 2000 Corruption Perception Index, and 18th out of 19 exporting countries in the 1999 Bribe Payers Index published by Transparency International. Several important reform measures such as disclosure of political funds or real name political financing system, have yet to be achieved.
Conclusion

A strong and reliable civil society can represent the interests of the people and serve as check and balance on the use of power by the state. Current circumstances require a new model of governance, and civil society organizations are among the most powerful indicator of this new model. In any new governance system, civil society organizations will play a more significant role than they have in the past. Reconstruction of civil society against partisan line is an outcome of the people’s disillusionment with party politics. The governments in East Asian democracies can accelerate the development of civil society. The electoral democracies of East Asia have further to go toward the deepening and consolidation of democracy. There are signs of an increasing strength and assertiveness in civil society in the democracies. Civil society has been very crucial to democratic transition, democratic failure, and the recent efforts to reform, deepen, and consolidate democracy in the Republic of Korea. Civic groups advocating democracy, justice, and better living conditions have become a dominant concern in South Korean society in the last decade. These civic groups directly raise issues relevant to governance and democracy. Utilizing information and communication technology, that have broadened the scope of citizen participation and information dissemination, which helps them enhance their visibility, policy influence and support bases. These changing contexts offer both opportunities and challenges for the future development of civil society.

Although civil society is weakened in East Asia, government policies have secured peace in South Korea. Civil society has been at the center of discussions on South Korean democratization. Since the transition to democracy in 1987, democratic consolidation has been a concern of Koreans mainly because they experienced two breakdowns of insufficient democracy in the early 1960s and 1970s. While there has been much more complex political dynamics
involved in the process of democratization in South Korea, the initial conditions set the structural constraints that led to the development of particular institutional arrangement and of political culture. In the future, one can hope that such a reconstructed civil society of South Korea will intervene on wider issues of public concern with its greater strength of autonomy and independence. Thus, social movements outside the political institution should play a more important role than before to promote political reform and consolidate the new democracy. South Korean civil society has empowered the people, making them more assertive in the political arena. South Korea’s once rigid society has shed its hostility towards different ideas. Traditional values of respect for authority and hierarchy are giving way to individual freedom and equality. Civil society’s autonomy should not be violated. Civil society organizations have not always fought against the government. They have worked together with the government whenever they were invited. The governments should not be afraid of free civil society since it encourages governments to be more honest, accountable, transparent and responsive to the public demands, which will win the support of the people and strengthen their legitimacy. It will take a long time to change people’s way of thinking and way of life. In this regard, civil society has a crucial role to play in enhancing public awareness and in challenging the deep-rooted culture of corruption. The West as well as the East Asia is entitled to asking for a better democracy, a democracy which is not only accountable to the people, but manifest in civic virtues and mutual concerns.

NOTES


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