

CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE STATE IN SOUTH KOREA

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I. INTRODUCTION

As 2007 drew to a close, South Korea was turning the page on a 10-year period of progressive political rule. The election of the Grand National Party's Lee Myung-bak to the presidency marked a clear shift away from the policies of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun and paved the way for what some commentators have billed as a more pragmatic and pro-business approach to governance. Against the backdrop of this change in voter sentiment and realignment of political power, 2007 also offered a glimpse into important trends in Korean civil society. Sharp disagreements over both domestic and foreign policy led to political polarization between liberal and conservative groups, especially with respect to North Korea and the second inter-Korean summit held in Pyongyang on October 4. Moreover, the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and other civil society organizations (CSOs) continued to serve as a buffer for government policies, offering a degree of continuity even when government officials deemed an issue too controversial. Human rights in North Korea is one notable area in which official silence was partially offset by vocal civil society agitation.

This paper offers an account of the major developments in South Korean civil society during 2007. After laying out the historical context, the paper focuses on CSO involvement in setting policy toward North Korea. The role that both progressive and conservative groups played in the October inter-Korean summit serves as a case study for assessing the broader role of civil society in the South Korean political system.

Before moving forward, however, some conceptual clarity is needed. "Civil society" is itself a nebulous term. It is handy to have a concise formulation that defines civil society as "voluntary flexible organizations," but that leaves

something to be desired. For the purposes of this paper, the London School of Economics Civil Society Centre's working definition will suffice:

Civil society refers to the arena of uncoerced collective action around shared interests, purposes and values. In theory, its institutional forms are distinct from those of the state, family and market, though in practice, the boundaries between state, civil society, family and market are often complex, blurred and negotiated. Civil society commonly embraces a diversity of spaces, actors and institutional forms, varying in their degree of formality, autonomy and power. Civil societies are often populated by organisations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organisations, community groups, women's organisations, faith-based organisations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, coalitions and advocacy groups.

The importance of civil society lies in its ability to provide a public space for the interaction of diverse societal values and interests. As will be seen in the sections that follow, Korean CSOs have played an active role in the past year in the public debate on a range of issues.

II. HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

In many ways, the growth of civil society in South Korea mirrors the growth of the nation's economy. In the early 1960s, South Korea's per capita GDP was lower than that of the Belgian Congo. Still recovering from the ravages of internecine war, Korea had not urbanized, and prospects for development looked bleak. Then there followed, seemingly out of nowhere, three decades of fantastic economic growth, during which the country transformed itself from an impoverished backwater to an urban industrial powerhouse. By the end of the 20th century, South Korea boasted the 11th largest economy in the world.

Civil society has emerged on the peninsula with similar gusto. Though scholars debate the precise origins of civil society in Korea (some argue that it existed in nascent form during the Chosun dynasty, while others see its birth coming much later, during the Japanese colonial era or the postwar period), there is no doubt that organized civic groups have blossomed since 1987. In that year, nationwide demonstrations forced the authoritarian Chun Doo-hwan regime to hold democratic elections and ushered in a new era of participatory politics in South Korea.

The years following Chun's capitulation saw an extraordinary increase in the number and variety of South Korea's civic groups and voluntary associations.

As Hagen Koo notes in his study of Korean civil society, these groups "included such organizations as the citizens' coalition for economic justice, the league of anti-pollution movements, feminist groups, teachers' associations for educational reform, journalists' associations for press freedom, citizens' watch groups for fair elections, citizen groups to fight political corruption or to fight regionalism, pressure groups for ensuring responsive state agencies, and so forth."

A cursory glance at the civil society groups that sprouted in this period shows most of them to be liberal, if not leftist. This should come as no surprise. Traditionally, such "liberal" interests as press freedom, environmental protection, and women's rights were precisely the interests that had been ignored or suppressed during South Korea's authoritarian period. Liberalization of the political sphere thus paved the way for the liberalization (and, in some sense, liberation) of civil society. The nature and composition of these new civic organizations reflected a degree of dissatisfaction with the course of the country's development. State-led economic growth had transformed South Korea, but it had also stymied the political and social aspirations of large segments of society. Civic groups in the 1990s sought to compensate for those decades of neglect.

III. RECENT TRENDS: THE POLARIZATION OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The growth of civil society continued apace under the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun. More than either of his two democratically elected predecessors, he actively courted and supported a wide variety of civic groups. Having won the 2002 election on a wave of youthful, progressive support, he proceeded to build a "participatory government" that both increased financial backing for civic groups and encouraged direct civil society participation in the policymaking process. President Roh Moo-hyun also continued former President Kim Dae-jung's practice of inviting prominent civic group leaders to join his administration. The consequences of this support for progressive civil society have varied. For one thing, participation in and giving to voluntary organizations have increased over the past five years. For another, the online "netizen" community has garnered considerable power as an informal force for political and social change.

At the same time, however, the close ties between government and civil society have provoked a conservative backlash. If the growth of progressive civic groups can be seen as a reaction to conservative, authoritarian rule, then the growth of conservative civic groups can be seen as just the opposite: a reaction to liberal, progressive rule. The New Right NGOs and political religious groups that have recently appeared are representative of this trend. One such group, the New Right Union, explicitly claims to combine the functions of a civil society organization and a political movement organization. Boasting some 15,000

members, from whom it draws most of its funding in small donations, the group advocates the advancement of liberalism, the rule of law, and globalization. Its inaugural slogan left little doubt about its goals: “To end the leftist power.”

The rise of conservative groups reflects a broader issue that South Korean civil society now faces: ideological polarization. As civic groups have become more involved in the political sphere, they have simultaneously experienced and contributed to the problems of politicization. Bitter left-right divides are just as sharp among civil society organizations as they are among political parties. Professor Shin Kwang-young of Chung-Ang University argues that this polarization has far-reaching negative consequences. “Such politically motivated activities by civic groups have resulted in public disapproval,” he told the *Korea Herald*, “weakening the very basis of the entire civil society.”

Nevertheless, it would not seem that the politicization of some civil society sectors has diminished South Korean society’s overall capacity for collective action. The response to a disastrous oil spill on December 7, 2007, which left a 40-kilometer swath of Korea’s western coastline soaked in petroleum, has been telling. Environmental NGOs have worked together with the government and ordinary citizens to organize a massive clean-up campaign. As of December 28, more than 300,000 volunteers from across the country had trekked to Anmyeondo and other devastated coastal areas to help with the relief effort. Press reports and conversations with ordinary Koreans revealed a widely felt sense of collective responsibility for providing help in the wake of this environmental tragedy.

IV. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE POLICY TOWARD NORTH KOREA

Yet a central fact remains: although a disaster may bring South Korean civil society groups together, many other issues drive them apart. Policy toward North Korea has long provided grist for political division in the South, and civil society reflects this ideological chasm. On the left, NGOs have united around the Sunshine Policy (launched under President Kim Dae-jung and continued by President Roh Moo-hyun) of reconciliation, cooperation, and aid. The Korea NGO Council for Cooperation with North Korea, for example, has brought together 60 separate NGOs under its tent. And on the right, civic and political groups have ardently taken up the cause of North Korean human rights, a position that anchors the hard-line stance they take toward Pyongyang.

Responses to moments of both crisis and cooperation reveal the depth of the divide between progressive and conservative groups. One low point came on July 4, 2006, when the regime of Kim Jong Il, Chairman of the National Defense Commission of North Korea, launched several ballistic missiles without providing any forewarning to China or South Korea. In the aftermath of the

launch, the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), the Korea Youth Corps (KYC), Peace Network, Women Making Peace, YMCA, Korean Federation of Environmental Movements (KFEM), Green Korea, and Korea Women’s Associations United (KWAU) released the following joint statement:

We express regret that, despite concerns from South Korea and the international community, North Korea proceeded with missile tests. ...The missile launches were an unwise action which raised the security stakes on the Korean Peninsula while also increasing the leverage of hawks in Washington and Tokyo. ...

We are also deeply worried about the adoption of a hard-line response, both domestically and internationally, towards North Korea. President Bush ceased negotiations regarding North Korea’s missiles as soon as he took office. ...

We also find it problematic that domestic politics and the media define the North Korean missile launches as a failure of South Korea’s “engagement policy” and initiate a hard-line approach toward the North. The current North Korean missile launch crisis is the result of the U.S. government’s hard-line policy and North Korea’s improper response to it.

In contrast to this measured response, in which every party in the conflict comes in for some cautious criticism, conservative groups were quick to take a hard-line stance against North Korea and the Roh Moo-hyun administration. They seized the opportunity to declare the so-called Sunshine Policy of rapprochement with the North a failure and to demand a thorough revamping of policy toward North Korea and a strengthening of ties with the United States.

This is not to say that a left-right divide pervades all of civil society, however. Indeed, such a facile bifurcation obscures the fact that many civil society groups are driven by issues, not by a broader political agenda. When interests clash, CSOs have not hesitated to turn on politicians who ostensibly share the same ideological perspective.

Indeed, the polarization of civil society has spurred opposition to President Roh Moo-hyun not only from the right but also from his erstwhile allies on the left. In late 2006, the looming prospect of a Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement mobilized opposition across the country. Protests in 13 cities by more than 70,000 farmers, workers, and activists left 63 people injured and caused an estimated 670 million won (\$720,000) in property damages. In the following days, police raided the regional offices of the Korea Alliance Against the Korea-U.S. FTA, a coalition of

about 300 civic groups responsible for leading the violent protests. Ironically, these groups had received much of their funding from none other than the government itself. Through annual budget allocations to civic organizations, the administration had effectively paid for the protests and then paid again to put them down.

Largely in response to these events, the government and the National Assembly took steps in January 2007 to cut subsidies to groups that hold violent rallies. The assembly approved 10 billion won in civic group support, as it had in years past, but also required the government to post on the Internet a list of groups that asked for subsidies, as well as the amount of funding each group received. Those groups linked to violent or destructive protests would be denied further subsidies.

An additional consequence of political polarization is that it colors even those CSOs that may wish to stay above the fray. Hakmin Kim of the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (NKHR), for example, complains that the NGO for which she works has been unfairly caught up in South Korea's partisan battles. "Our organization is very nonpolitical," she said in an interview, "but whenever people hear 'North Korean human rights,' they think 'conservative.'" NKHR's position, according to Kim, is that reunification cannot be achieved without some improvement in the North Korean human rights situation. To that end, the organization is working to align with governments that have diplomatic relations with North Korea and to organize international conferences (the most recent of which was held in London on January 22, 2008) that call attention to NKHR's cause.

The case of NKHR reveals the difficulty civil society groups face in maintaining political independence while simultaneously promoting policy change. Ultimately, policy change requires elite support. If a given policy has backing from only the elites of one political stripe, then some degree of interest alignment between politicians and civil society groups—and thus politicization, whether real or perceived—is difficult to avoid.

V. AVENUES OF POWER: CSOs IN THE KOREAN POLITICAL SYSTEM

The task of gaining elite support, of course, can often be a difficult one. CSOs use a variety of tactics to get their messages out and their pet policies passed into law. These methods can include direct contact with government officials, think tank conferences, media campaigns, and street-level demonstrations. Ultimately, however, the success of these efforts depends on the political environment in which they are undertaken.

In a forthcoming study of anti-base movements in South Korea, Andrew Yeo describes the polarization between progressive and conservative groups, with the younger generation of Koreans holding particularly negative views toward the presence of U.S. bases on the peninsula. Yet, despite this diversity of views, there persists a strong elite security consensus that favors reacting to U.S. policy toward North Korea rather than initiating changes in the U.S.-Korea alliance. "The progressive Uri Party has achieved some success in moving the alliance towards a more equal partnership," says Yeo, "particularly in the area of wartime operational control. Yet there are limits to what the liberal party can achieve. South Korea's foreign policy apparatus is still heavily influenced by a conservative line of thinking, and an elite consensus continues to operate on issues pertaining to U.S.-South Korean security relations." According to Yeo's analysis, the presence of this security consensus—which itself is driven by entrenched political and ideological structures—makes it difficult for the alternative voices of progressives and radicals to gain traction in foreign policy circles. Thus, while many activists expected Blue House and National Assembly officials in the Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun administrations to depart from what they saw as psychological dependence on the U.S., they were often disappointed to see these formerly radical politicians moderate their views once in power.

Yeo's work on anti-base movements suggests that there are clear limits to what CSOs can achieve in the South Korean political system. Their effectiveness depends not only on citizen support and close ties to elites but also on structural factors that shape the elite consensus on a given issue. If the elite consensus is strong, CSOs promoting alternative policies will face a rough road ahead. If the consensus is weak, they may find more openings for change.

What, then, can be said about the role of CSOs in one of the most significant foreign policy events of 2007, the October summit between President Roh Moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il? The following sections will outline the ways in which South Korean civil society groups sought to affect both the public perceptions and the substantive outcomes of this event.

VI. CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE 2007 INTER-KOREAN SUMMIT

As noted above, crises in inter-Korean relations often expose the ideological divisions in South Korea. But the reactions of CSOs to apparently positive developments in North-South relations have been no less polarized. Whereas 2006 was a turbulent year, punctuated by North Korean missile launches and an underground nuclear test, 2007 was a year characterized by a marked relaxation of tensions on the peninsula. In addition to improvements in relations between Pyongyang and Seoul, a series of meetings and negotiations between North

Korea and the United States led to progress toward peace and a North Korean agreement to dismantle its nuclear weapons program. And yet, the ideological gap among CSOs showed no sign of closing.

The October summit was the first such event since former President Kim Dae-jung's historic trip to Pyongyang in 2000. In the days and weeks before President Roh Moo-hyun followed in his predecessor's footsteps to meet with Kim Jong Il, progressive organizations welcomed the summit as an opportunity to boost peace on the peninsula. The Civil Society Organizations Network in Korea, an umbrella coalition of 189 civic groups, emphasized the need for economic and military cooperation between North and South and urged the South Korean government to abolish "outdated laws and systems made during the cold-war era."

Conservative civic groups, on the other hand, saw summitry as a political power play. According to these organizations, President Roh Moo-hyun was using his visit to Pyongyang as a tool to bolster progressive political candidates in the lead-up to December's presidential election. Park Sang-hak, head of the Democracy Network Against NK Gulag, argued that the summit's agenda did not reflect public opinion in the South. "What South Koreans want is denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula," he told the *Korea Times*, "and it is what Roh and Kim should talk about. But Roh said he would not irritate Kim by urging him to scrap the nuclear program."

VII. POLITICAL ELITES: SHAPING THE SUMMIT AGENDA

While CSOs dug in their heels and released statements to the media, political elites were reticent about the details of their plan for the upcoming talks. President Roh Moo-hyun had clear personal and political reasons for pursuing a meeting with Kim Jong Il. A fruitful summit would not only validate his five years of work in building constructive ties with the North, it would also culminate a lifetime spent battling a political system that he viewed as needlessly hostile toward Pyongyang. Moreover, it would lend support to President Roh Moo-hyun's would-be successors, thus preserving policy continuity in the next administration. Even if a more conservative president were to take office in 2008, agreements reached at the summit could constrain a new government's ability to radically alter its stance toward North Korea.

The agenda itself, however, was kept secret before President Roh Moo-hyun's departure. When Seoul announced plans on August 8 for a summit to be held later that month, it offered only a broad sketch of the issues to be discussed by Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il. The government's official statement issued that day said, "The two leaders' discussions on a Korean Peninsula peace treaty

will help widen bilateral military trust and further upgrade mutual economic cooperation and exchanges." Officials also expressed their desire to continue the progress made by former President Kim Dae-jung at the first inter-Korean summit, but specific agenda items were left vague. In response to questions from reporters, Unification Minister Lee Jae-jeong said that while the establishment of a Korean peace regime would likely be considered, the details of other discussion points remained to be hashed out in the coming weeks.

Ten days after that announcement, the summit's August 28–30 time frame was pushed back more than a month, ostensibly because of severe flooding in the North. The delay did nothing to help clarify the planned agenda; indeed, it only left more time for speculation.

Of paramount importance to political and civil society groups on both sides of the aisle was the question of North Korean denuclearization. Speaking in Washington, DC, in mid-September, former President Kim Dae-jung clearly stated that dismantlement of the North's nuclear facilities was a necessary step toward permanent peace on the peninsula. He said that President Roh Moo-hyun would definitely raise the issue of denuclearization at the October summit. But the president seemed to have other plans. In the lead-up to the talks, he was reported to have said that, since many others were already talking about denuclearization, he saw no reason to risk ruining the atmosphere of the talks by raising such a contentious issue.

VIII. CIVIL SOCIETY AS A "THIRD PARTY"

In the end, the outcome of the summit surprised many observers. In addition to pledging to continue to implement the agreement signed at the June 15, 2000, inter-Korean summit, North and South Korea agreed on several new cooperative measures. These include the development of a "special peace and cooperation zone in the West Sea [Yellow Sea]"; the completion of "the first-phase construction of the Kaesong Industrial Complex at an early date and [the commencement of] the second-stage development project"; and a mutual recognition of "the need to end the current armistice regime and build a permanent peace regime" on the peninsula. Notably absent from the October 4, 2007, joint statement was any concrete mention of denuclearization or human rights issues.

Conservative groups were predictably vexed. In the aftermath of the summit, they ramped up their criticisms of President Roh Moo-hyun and began jockeying for influence in the run-up to December's presidential elections. On November 6, an alliance of organizations associated with the New

Right Movement set forth comprehensive recommendations for the next administration's North Korea policy. Members of the New Right Policy Committee, Citizens United for Better Society, Lawyers for Citizens, Liberty Union, and Hansun Foundation for Freedom and Prosperity jointly condemned the Sunshine Policy of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. They criticized the policy for, among other things, failing to produce North Korean political reform, failing to open the North Korean economy, and failing to address North Korea's human rights situation. The main causes of the policy's failure, they argued, were its overoptimism and overreliance on one-way economic assistance.

In the Sunshine Policy's stead, the New Right groups proposed the strengthening of international cooperation based on an alliance among South Korea, the United States, and Japan. Rather than provide one-way assistance, Seoul would participate in an international consortium to develop the North's economy. It would actively encourage internal reform, assist in organizing domestic and international reform-focused groups, and, significantly, require as a prerequisite the complete denuclearization of the Korean peninsula.

As the conservative sectors of South Korean society were well aware, the October summit's outcome (as well as the fact that it was held at all) reflected the general policy preferences of South Korea's progressive politicians and CSOs. Yet there is little available evidence that demonstrates the precise ways in which CSOs failed or succeeded in influencing the summit's agenda. Did President Roh Moo-hyun raise (or not raise, as the case may be) certain agenda items because of civil society pressure, or because of unrelated personal or political reasons? Does the joint statement reflect South Korean demands and North Korean concessions, or vice versa? These questions may never be completely answered.

It does seem clear, however, that once the parties from North and South Korea met in Pyongyang, there was little time for CSOs to exert any real influence over the outcome of the summit. According to one summit participant on the South Korean side who was interviewed for this paper, substantive interaction with North Korean officials proved difficult. Meetings of delegate subcommittees (held separately from the main talks between President Roh Moo-hyun and Chairman Kim Jong Il) were limited to one hour, and North Korean officials had no freedom to deviate from the North Korean Workers' Party line. Moreover, while South Korea sent a delegation of independent civil society representatives and academics to the October summit, North Korea sent counterparts who had been organized and effectively "corporatized" by Kim Jong Il's regime in Pyongyang.

Even if academics and CSO representatives were limited in their ability to sway events at the October summit, many observers nevertheless view the overall role played by civil society in reunification efforts as critically important. The South Korean intellectual Paik Nak-chung has long argued that Korean reunification will differ dramatically from any historical precedents. "Briefly put, not only is a Vietnamese-style reunification through military conquest out of the question in Korea," he writes, "but even a peaceful reunification, unlike that of Germany or of Yemen, can only proceed gradually, stage by stage." In Paik's view, civil society will have a major say in both the timing and the nature of a gradual North-South reunification, essentially functioning as a "third party" beside the governments in Seoul and Pyongyang. "Eventually," he says, "it will not be possible to prevent the sphere of civic participation extending to the entire peninsula."

Paik is not alone in arguing for the importance of civil society's third party buffer role in the Korean political system. Officials at the Ministry of Unification in Seoul noted during a recent briefing that CSOs are not bound to follow government policies; thus, they can help reduce the tensions caused by politics. For example, CSOs such as the Alliance for North Korean Human Rights can consistently provide humanitarian aid to North Korea even when diplomatic relations may be strained. Indeed, Ministry of Unification officials said that humanitarian aid sent by NGOs is often more readily accepted by the North than aid sent through official government channels. CSOs are therefore uniquely positioned to actively engage with the North Korean people and have the independence to pursue creative cooperation projects. Initiatives such as visits by South Korean pop singers to Pyongyang and the development of a *Korean National Language Publishing Dictionary* have been undertaken at the behest of civil society groups in Seoul.

IX. CONCLUSION

Korean civil society was active in 2007. This paper has detailed only some of the major developments and, for reasons of space, has left others unmentioned. Overall, major political issues such as North Korean denuclearization and reunification policy continue to seep into the realm of South Korean civil society. The polarization of civil society between left and right, progressive and conservative—artificial though those distinctions may at times be—has alienated many of the ordinary citizens whom CSOs aim to represent. Politicization can be poisonous. But at the same time, politicization can open doors through which CSOs can bring pressure to bear on political elites who might otherwise be less responsive to grassroots demands. To the extent

that civil society can serve as a third party buffer, it also has the potential to substantially affect the course of Korean politics by working outside traditional political power channels.

As Lee Myung-bak embarks on his five-year term as president of South Korea, conservative CSOs will likely find more receptive ears for their policies among political elites. But this does not guarantee that the interests of civil society and the government will necessarily coincide. If the experience of progressive CSOs under the Roh Moo-hyun administration is any indication, Grand National Party officials and New Right NGOs may clash as often as they cooperate. Meanwhile, the South Korean left, stranded in the cold after December's elections, might take solace in knowing that its civil society representatives can continue to work for progressive causes even as the political winds change.

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND FOREIGN RELATIONS UNDER LEE MYUNG-BAK

Shaw-Lin Chaw

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a democracy: not as old or as deeply rooted as Japan's, nor as politically fractious as Taiwan's. Nevertheless, after the successful election of four presidents in a minimalist democratic climate of largely free and fair elections, and a fifth president in December 2007, South Korea is certainly a democracy with some measure of vibrancy. Cited by the *New York Times* in 1995 as a viable "East Asian model of prosperity and democracy," based on fairness, equality, and the rule of law, the country survived the economic hard landing of the 1997 Asian financial crisis to emerge even stronger and more invigorated. South Korea is currently the world's 13th largest economy, and it climbed up 12 spots last year to secure the rank of 11th best country for global business in a poll by the World Economic Forum.

From the evolution of civil societies to a strong and independent news media, South Korea now has all the institutional underpinnings of a democracy. It has also experienced genuine power transitions: leadership changed hands peacefully in 1998 from the conservative government of Kim Young-sam to the first liberal dissident president, Kim Dae-jung, and to Roh Moo-hyun five years later. Power will return to the conservatives after those two liberal administrations. Lee Myung-bak will assume office on February 25, 2008.

Despite numerous setbacks and limited successes over the years, South Korea's democratization story—especially during the Sixth Republic, from 1987 to the present—has been an astounding one. With a focus on the recent presidential election, this paper examines how the leaders of this medium-sized state