

# Civil Society and Democratic Consolidation in South Korea Post-1987

**Pravir Kumar Ram**

Doctoral candidate CEAS, SIS, JNU, New Delhi-110067

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## Background

More than sixty countries have undertaken the transition to democracy since the third wave of global democratization commenced in 1974. South Korea represents one of the most crucial and instructive cases. Its economic boom and later became one of the leading economic world leader in the world which makes it a unique country. Huge business conglomerates, high foreign investment, an extensive enterprising and highly educated and skilled workforce, and most crucial strategic location in between two world powers China and Japan. With the twelve years of old democracy, it entered in the twenty-first century with a long battle from the authoritarian regime. South Korea now enjoys a level of democratic vitality and stability which is without precedent in its history. Still, the South Korean democracy is in the nascent stage and can be considered in some minimal way "consolidated", its weak political structure and immature and shallow political institutions unable to provide a robust political structure and meaningful choice of policy courses to provide the responsiveness, accountability, and transparency anticipated by the South Korean people. It becomes very significant for a country to undertake the fundamental reforms to revive economic growth and secure broad political legitimacy since these political problems have extensive consequences.

The political system of South Korea has undergone a profound transformation since the electoral democracy was introduced in 1987, after more than two and a half decades of authoritarian rule dominated by the military. It was June 1987; Roh Tae Woo was named as the presidential candidate from the ruling party (Democratic justice party) which was widely perceived as handing Roh the presidency, sparked large pro-democracy rallies in the Seoul. In response, Roh Tae Woo relieved a dangerous standstill between the authoritarian regime and democratic opposition announcing fundamental reforms in the political system of South Korea, introducing fair and direct presidential elections. There were a series of reforms which radically reshaped political power structures. After one month later the "Great workers struggle" broke out, disturbing the industrial peace and displaying for the first time the structural power labor unity which emerged during the previous decade's economic development growth.

Two decades of long military regime finally brought down and the first time free and fair elections were conducted in December 1987, and the new series of conflict over building and reforming <sup>1</sup>democratic institution was started. With the establishment of the formal government and hearing committees on the Kwangju massacre and the illegitimate activities Chun Doo Hwan's fifth republic 1980-1987 was in the opposition in the national assembly of 1988, the military regime lost its historical political clout forever and was sent back to the barracks.

Five years afterward of the political mobilization turbulence continued in the party system. Kim Young Sam won the presidential elections in 1992, he was the only civilian leader to head a South Korean government since 1961, and he had vowed extensive reforms to deepen the democracy and improve the accountability of the government. His presidency was pronounced by significant reforms and institutional changes, corruption and money politics, constant agitation in both party politics and the civil society and the finally a painful financial crisis and the economic collapse. The year 1997 marked a decade since the transition to democracy commenced in South Korea with the end of Kim Young Sam presidential term. Some of the third wave democracies of central Asia and southern Europe accomplished democratic consolidation within a decade of their birth. Could it also be said in South Korea's case? How stable and effective South Korean democracy is? What are the impediments to its improvement and deepening?

This paper seeks to answer these questions by analyzing the political, social, cultural and economic changes. It appraises the magnitude of democratic institutional and behavioral changes in South Korea and the impacts of democratization on civil society and the economy. What has been achieved since the military regime was forced to accept free and direct presidential elections in 1987? Have the institution's reforms opened a new channel for political participation and citizen influence?

After appraising the three decades of South Korea's new democracy, one has to also look at the future of democracy in that nation. What are the fundamental challenges for consolidating and improving democracy in South Korea? What are the major impediment in the political culture, social structure, and political institutions and practices to transforming electoral democracy into a more responsive, accountable, pluralistic and liberal democracy? In comparison with the historical cases, what are the factors that South Korea possesses which facilitate the consolidation and deepening of electoral democracy?

### **Decentralization and consolidation of democracy in South Korea**

South Korean civil society makes it impossible for any democratically elected government to abrogate or scrap democracy in order to sustain its power. Any democratically elected government try to quash democracy it will face serious legitimation issue that will undeniably generate ripsnorting popular resistance. At present in South Korea, there are diverse independent civil society groups, which are linked both horizontally and vertically to each other and capable to frustrate any anti-democratic attempt, since it has the robust structure, well organized and well-extended communication system to mobilize enormous popular resistance across a wide range of social structure and classes. Even if the military tries to wage a coup it has to face similar consequences.

Robust and well-organized, the military was able to make a "coup d'état" easily without facing powerful resistance from the civil society groups. But the present situation In South Korea is utterly different from that 1960 or 1980s. Civil society is now robust and elaborately organized; the diversified and flourishing economy in South Korea, and there is lack of social conflicts which could disrupt the smooth democratic transition, furthermore, there is no alternative to democracy as a legitimate form of government in South Korea. Having these reasons, neither the government nor the military has ever tried to abolish democracy post-democratic transition. In 1988, democratically elected President Roh Tae-Woo took power it seemed that in his presidency the civil society has grown and became strong enough to prevent any attempt to overthrow democracy. Civil society contributes to the consolidation of democracy.

If democracy needs to be rooted deep, it is very crucial for common citizens to get habituated to democracy at the level of voluntary associations. Democracy will be fragile and superficial if citizens practice it only while casting their votes in the election booth. But increasingly, it is being used actively in a variety of other spheres in South Korea, now democratic principles and procedures are followed in almost all the significant civic organizations, movement organizations, and interest associations. For example, citizen coalition for economic justice (CCEJ) practices "committee democracy" where major decisions are made by the committee members and those decisions are implemented by the working staffs. With the democratic transition proceedings, it is quite striking that even those interest associations whose leadership selection and administrative activities had been controlled by the state became largely democratized. The best example of this type of change is the central associations of farmer's cooperatives. During the authoritarian era, its top executive had been appointed by the president, and the heads of the local cooperatives, in turn, had been chosen by the top executive from the candidates selected at the local level. But this undemocratic practice of leadership selection has been eliminated, and the association's procedures have been fully certainly there were other factors also that affected the fate of democracy. For example, the levels of economic developments and inequality and the degree of class conflicts and ethnic conflicts are all important. Therefore, maintenance and consolidation of democracy cannot be explained solely by the growth of civil society. Yet it must be true that a dense and well organized civil society is one of the most crucial factors in maintaining and consolidating democracy. There are various committees in the CCEJ, the central committee which meets once a year and decides the general policy and the directions and selects major staff members, the standing committee which meets once a month, deals with current issues and makes specific decisions and finally twenty-two policy committees discuss specific issues and suggest policy proposals to the standing committee. All the major issues are discussed in the various committees, and decisions are made collectively on a democratic basis.

Therefore, it is impossible for any influential leader to dominate the CCEJ. In other words, the iron law of oligarchy does not exist in these associations. The other associations too experienced internal democratization. Increased activities on the part of voluntary associations to represent those who had been underrepresented before also accompanied the growth of civil society. For instance, the urban poor, handicapped, elderly, homeless, jobless, street vendors, battered women, children without parents, alcoholics and other marginal groups were largely neglected by both the government and private organization during the authoritarian regime. As voluntary associations mushroomed with the democratic transitions, however, new associations began to emerge to represent the rights and welfare of various social

groups, and existing associations and organizations also began to pay more attention. Furthermore, businesses that had not been concerned with social welfare in the past began to spend more money for this purpose, usually by establishing corporate foundations. Thus civil society came to provide a protective net for those neglected groups. Considering the immensity of unmet needs, the support from civil society is not entirely adequate. But the protection and representation of the socially weak by civil groups do help to ameliorate suffering and press the government to be more responsive to the demands of the weak. This, in turn, encourages those marginal groups to remain within the framework of democracy. In this way, growing civil society engagement on behalf of the neglected enhances democratic legitimacy and contributes to democratic consolidation.

Finally, Those who are involved in organizing and managing civil associations learn how to deliberate, coordinate and represent the interest of their members or the general populace. They also learn how to organize collective actions to achieve common goals. Through these experiences, they came to acquire the habits of discourse, tolerance, and compromise. However, political parties and government official seeking to recruit new elites tend to look for them among the leaders of Political sociology of Regime Changes As democratization weakened and eliminated this type of relationship, therefore, business firms rushed to make diverse social contributions to welfare, education, environmental protection and so forth.

They also established corporate foundations and spent a large amount of money. The merits of those leaders are many, their sense of public interest, their morality, their professional skills in organization and representation, their habits of democracy, and their popularity. After the democratic opening in June 1987, numerous civil leaders have been recruited in this way. In the elections for the national assembly and for the local assemblies, they have been recruited as candidates by the political parties. Sometimes, they have worked as advisers, bureaucrats, and local leaders of various parties. Furthermore, when the Kim Young Sam government was inaugurated in February 1993, many leaders of civil society began to work in the presidential office and other government agencies. The pattern of presidential appointments and consultations from civil society continued after Kim Dae Jung assumed the presidency. This is quite a new phenomenon, in that political elites, have generally been recruited in the past from the high ranks of the military, the state bureaucracy, business, and academia. Ho Keun Song argues that this vertical co-optation of its leaders has severely weakened civil society.

Similarly, with regard to post-communist countries, Aleksander Smolar argues the nascent civil societies were “depopulated” when their leaders went to serve in the newly democratized governments or started their own businesses. However, South Korean civil society is not as weak as Song claims or as those in former communist countries because it has now built strong organizational and human resources base. Therefore, civil society has not been damaged or depopulated, even though many leaders took positions either in the political parties or in the government. Its comprehensive reforms policies, ranging from anti-corruption campaigns to labor reform, inevitably brought about strong resistance from vested interests. For these reforms efforts, diverse civic organization, movement, and even the press helped immensely.

Many people worried that the CCEJ would face serious trouble once it lost its most influential and popular leaders. All reform policies of the Kim Young Sam government could be implemented effectively only with strong support from civil society. This type of cooperation between civil society and the government has laid a promising foundation for democratic consolidation while enhancing regime performance. But it should be noted that such vertical cooperation is not yet solid enough, as discussed. A large number of problems still remain. Furthermore, unresolved conflicts and tensions accumulate, requiring a creative solution and more constructive cooperation between the government and civil society for consolidating democracy. Remaining problems: At present, only a few in South Korea question the desirability and legitimacy of democracy in principle. All major political and social actors and most of the mass public believe that there are no alternatives to democracy and that democracy is the best form of government. In this sense, democracy is firmly consolidated at a general normative level. However, specific institutional issues like a better form of government, the proper length of a presidential term, and the proper relations between the central and local government cause wide disagreements and tensions among political forces. In other words, the degree of institutionalization of South Korean democracy is not yet very high. Three factors seem to account for this dualism: the strong regional cleavages and institutional weakness of political parties, the tendency of South Korean democracy toward delegative democracy, and international weaknesses of civil society.

As its well known in South Korea, one of the most destructive and divisive forces is regional cleavage developed in response to wide regional economic disparities, the continued political dominance of one region over others until recently and political manipulation and amplification of regional conflicts by political elites.

## Conclusion

Democratic consolidation in South Korea laden with many impediments, vulnerabilities, constraints, and challenges. Despite elections have institutionalized, political society is not yet adequately institutionalized to articulate and represent the will of people in the electoral arena. Civil associations are not flourishing enough to arbitrate between individuals and the state, to broaden significantly the flow of information to the citizenry, to lessen the burden of overloaded political society or to check the tendency of unlawful usurpation of power and the tyranny of an intolerant majority. Even the constitution is not institutionalized enough to regulate the political and social life of the general people. The favorable conditions for democratic consolidation can be created and the hurdles to democratic consolidation can be removed by the cautious efforts of leadership and the resolute organization. South Korea should not wait for favorable conditions. Rather, with new and fresh efforts they should construct the environment for victorious democratic consolidation

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