

Interest Group Politics in Transition: Korean case

**LEE, Chung Hee, Ph. D.
Department of Political Science
Hankuk University of Foreign Studies
270 Imundong, Dongdaemungu, Seoul, Korea
chlee815@hotmail.com**

***Prepared for presentation at the International Guest Lecture, 15 December 2014,
Brawijaya University, Malang, East Java, Indonesia.**

Interest Group Politics in Transition: Korean case

LEE, Chung Hee
(Hankuk University of Foreign Studies)

I. Introduction

As a result of the industrialization process that began in the 1960s, Korea has achieved remarkable economic development, which has provided a physical foundation for the advancement of civil society. Rapid economic growth has bolstered the ranks of the middle class, which plays a central role in the development of civil society, and led to the advent of various groups as political forces. At the same time, sustained industrialization has resulted in a diversification of the social structure. A landmark event in the development of civil society was the massive pro-democracy demonstrations of June 1987, culminating in the June 29 declaration, during which workers and the middle class joined hands in the struggle against the authoritarian military regime for the sake of democratization. In the aftermath of the democratization measures adopted by the government, political institutions became democratized amid an explosion of demands from diverse interest groups, leading to a proliferation of nongovernmental movements and the development of a genuine civil society.

The development of civil society and civic movements provided a foundation for the emergence of a diversity of specialized social functions. During the 1980s, civic movements were primarily focused on problems related to conflicts between social classes or strata. However, in the 1990s, popular movements began to move beyond class issues and focus on promoting the common good of society. While the earlier phase mainly involved an adversarial stance toward the government, the more recent activities have been more inclined to address contradictions within the state through cooperative efforts. This new approach has helped to reinforce the state's legitimacy, while marking a transformation in the nature of civic movements, which were once denounced as revisionist by progressive social reformists.

Between the latter half of the 1980s and the early 1990s, Korea's civil society underwent rapid changes in its ideological orientation, organizational format, functions and influence on the general public. Amid these changes, due to the renewed interests of differing social strata, specific politico-economic issues were created, such as the government's policy related to the distribution of wealth, promotion of a new concept of land ownership, and changes in the

perceptions of the foreign powers surrounding Korea. Under these circumstances, the patterns of interest groups' self-help efforts, cooperative relations and rivalries among themselves changed the characteristics of civil society. This period coincided with an epochal transition in Korean politics from an authoritarian to a democratic system, which enabled civil society to also undergo transformation in regard to its character and the leadership of civic movements. With the overriding goal of civic movements during this period being to wage pro-democracy campaigns against despotism, unity and cohesiveness were viewed as fundamental values of civil society.

However, with the advancement of civic movements and development of civil society, it is inevitable for a maturing society to experience various consequences related to diversification, disunity and conflict. The current situation of Korean society, which is undergoing a process of rapid development and diversification despite its limited experience with pluralism, has compelled society and civic movement leaders to simultaneously shoulder a variety of burdens. Moreover, changes in the structure and nature of civil society are occurring in conjunction with the progress that is being realized in the consolidation of democratization, society's evolving relationship with the state, and adjustment in the balance of power between civic and interest groups involving various sectors. Therefore, the leaders of civil society must be prepared to address a fundamental question facing today's society: How can it be transformed into a dynamic society that is capable of spearheading the needed reform of our nation?

This paper will explore Korean experiences concerning the interest group politics along with the development of civil society and process of democratization. Interest group politics, civil society, and democratization are all dynamic and mobile so that it is difficult to catch definite and clear relationship among them. Through examining the features of Korean interest group politics, however, one can find out general pattern of relationship among various factors and actors or very unique characteristics of it. Anyhow, it is valuable to share the each country's experience with others.

II. Basis of Korean Civil Society: Economic Development and Socio-Political Transition

Rapid Economic Growth

In 1961, an authoritarian state was established after a military coup led by Park Chung Hee, who set economic development as his first priority. President Park became an absolute ruler of the country to continue economic development planning.

The record of South Korea's economic development under the Park government was

remarkable. The rapid economic growth since the early 1960s was based on an intentional shift from the policy of import substitution to aggressive export drives which the development-oriented government carried out under a series of five-year economic development plans beginning with the First Five-year Plan of 1962-66. Korea followed a strategy of economic growth that depended heavily on foreign capital and technology and contained many elements of the bureaucratic-authoritarian model. In the developmental effort of the 1960s, it was aided by an educated, achievement-oriented working force, development-oriented, hard-working bureaucratic elites, and a favorable world market.¹ A primary base for Korea's rapid economic development since the mid-1960s has been greatly improved capital accumulation and investment through tax collection and saving.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, an economic miracle was engineered by this authoritarian regime of the capitalist development state. The capitalist state was characterized by a strong government that readily intervened in the market to influence the economy, a high degree of state autonomy vis-à-vis civil society, and an efficient bureaucracy. Over the forty years Korea has gone through a period of spectacular economic growth, thanks to the continuing industrialization of domestic economy and expansion of overseas export markets.²

An overall assessment of President Park's legacy is complex balance sheet of negative and positive contributions. As a result of Park's persistent drive for rapid economic development, he succeeded in creating a substantial economic class with a stake in social stability and political continuity. Korea has done better than most developing countries in preventing extreme mal-distribution of wealth.

Social Diversification and Mobilization

At the same time, economic development has played an important role in supporting the transition from military authoritarianism to democratic rule in Korea. In other words, rapid economic growth brought about greater social diversity and complexity, which increased the pressure for democratization. Economic prosperity and improved living standards reduced the sense of economic insecurity, leading to popular acceptance of the process. On the other hand, the government's successful implementation of industrialization and economic development plans eventually brought about political problems that seriously threatened the stability and effectiveness of the government toward the latter part of the 1970s. By that time, Korea had undergone a high degree of social mobilization and raised political consciousness.

¹ Sung-joo Han, "Political Institutionalization in South Korea, 1961-1984," in *Asian Political Institutionalization*, edited by A. Scalapino, Seizaburo Sato, and Jusuf Wanandi (Berkeley, California: UC Berkeley Press, 1988), p.128.

With the successful attainment of its developmental goals, Korean society began to change. The rapid economic growth has actually tended to widen the gap between the government and the people, the rich and the poor, and the urban and rural areas. Indeed, during times of rapid social and economic change; most people tend to become increasingly discontented, frustrated and alienated.³

Certain popular sectors in civil society were excluded from political participation. These included workers, farmers, progressive intellectuals, students, and certain religious leaders. The Korean government, through powerful measures, openly repressed these social sectors. However, during the democratic transition those groups began to exercise their influence in criticizing government policies, providing the momentum to change the relationship between the state and civil society.

Legitimacy Crisis and Aspiration for Democracy

The ongoing political slogan from the Park government had been that "political stability is the indispensable requisite of economic growth." This implies that political stability can be assured by political continuity and the extension of governmental power. Park turned into a life-long dictator by amending the constitution in 1972 to establish the Fourth Republic. After President Park was assassinated in October 1979, Korean people thought that democratic government will be established. The successive regimes of the Fifth and Sixth Republic, under Chun and Roh, both lacked political legitimacy due to military intervention in civilian politics.

The military-dominant authoritarian states were instrumental in achieving the developmental goals of modernization, but the lack of political legitimacy hampered the progress of political development and democratization. The deepening legitimacy problems of authoritarian rule of *Yushin*, and its successor regimes in the Fifth and Sixth Republics, combined with the rapid economic growth of South Korea in the post-1962 period, set the stage for the political miracle of democratization.⁴

Public concern gradually shifted from material improvements to demand to improve the political environment. The Korean public expected and demanded democracy that guaranteed more political rights and freedom. It is probable that the democratic superstructure of more than four decades has left certain patterns of political process and practice, and combined with the education system that has emphasized democratic principles, theories, and values to a new

2 Wonmo Dong, "Regional Cleavages in South Korean Politics," *Korea Observer*, Vol. 26, No. 2, summer 1995, p.7.

3 Ki-Shik Hahn, "Underlying Factors in Political Party Organization and Elections," in *Korean Politics in Transition*, edited by Edward Reynolds Wright, (Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1975), p.99.

4 Young Whan Kihl, "The Legacies of Confucian Culture and South Korean Politics and Economics: An Interpretation," p.48.

generation of young Koreans, it has provided the Korean people with democratic values and political awareness. Mass media also played a significant role to increase public expectations for a democratic government and contributed to the democratization process.

In 1986 and 1987, there was a greater demand for political participation of the popular sectors which was led by the political opposition which demanded restoration of democracy. University students waged violent anti-government demonstrations and workers began to become more militant by waging strikes to demand higher wages and better working conditions. In the summer of 1987, a crisis was avoided by Roh Tae Woo's (successor to President Chun) June 29 declaration of democratization, which promised to carry out democratic reform including popular presidential elections.⁵

The 1992 presidential election marked a turning point in Korean political history as it enabled the peaceful transfer of power from a military leader to a civilian politician. In 1997, another important step toward democratization took place with Kim Dae Jung's election as president.

Even in the civilian government, however, the authoritarian political behaviors were not discarded in the government of President Kim Young-Sam and President Kim Dae-Jung. The birth of Roh Mu-Hyun government in 2002 opened new possibilities of ending "three Kims' politics" in which three leading political leaders had dominated political process for decades. The Roh Mu-Hyun Government provided more chances of political participation and a stepping stone for a civil society to become a politicized society. Social classes that had once been alienated began to participate enthusiastically in the political process. During the 16th Presidential Election, the new participatory mentality had begun with a grass-roots campaign manned by volunteers and funded by small contributors. People in their twenties and thirties, previously considered an uninformed and apathetic group, contributed positive energy in the campaign and brought dynamic change to civil society.

In sum, seventy years of South Korean modern history embody the nation's aspiration for democracy. The modern political history of Korea has been the saga of a struggle to narrow the gap between democratic aspirations and political reality. Despite the division of the peninsula, the Korean War, student revolution, coups and assassination, the Korean people did not lose faith in democracy.

⁵ Despite the popular direct presidential election in 1987, civilian leaders could not take over the political power from ex-military general politicians. Korean people were so disappointed with the irrational behavior of two civilian leaders, Kim Young-Sam and Kim Dae-Jung.

IT and Globalization

Development of civil society in Korea has been influenced by the information technology and globalization process. Koreans are familiar with the words of "digital democracy" or "e-politics." Their high-tech boom has unleashed a new form of grassroots participation by millions of "Netizens" who exploit the latest information technology to bypass the party machines of the old system. With the world's highest penetration of high-speed and mobile Internet services, Korea is at the cutting edge of technology that is transforming the socio-political system, making it more open and democratic. It could be a preview of the shape of Western democracy. Almost half of Korean voters are below the age of 40 and they are prime demographic for users of the Internet and cell phones.⁶ Communications through internet has become the most popular way of organizing street rallies, socio-political groups and gatherings.

Rapid globalization has created a complex web of interdependence in almost every dimension of life. In fact, globalization is a process of that enables world societies to be able to connect in every walk of life. Globalists believe that we can and should establish a global society, which goes beyond national boundaries, ideology and world political institutions. Each nation state should eliminate obstacles of international trade, thus permitting international commerce, investment, currencies, and information across the national boundaries.

The impact of globalization in the social and political arena is not as clear as it is in economics. Such issues as human rights and nuclear proliferation can be targets of global pressure that provide global standard. Globalization may be one of the factors for democratization. It provides us with standards of democratic political processes and institutions around the world. Because globalization emphasizes open society, diverse cultural norms, and tolerance, the values of globalization go with those of democratic politics. It is safe to note that Korean aspirations for democracy go hand in hand with globalization. Through economic growth and democratization, the country has become a member of the international community and could accept global standards and the globalist view.

⁶ The political element is part of a decade-long technological revolution in Korea, where more than half of all homes are plugged into high-speed broadband Internet connections -- the highest rate in the world. (In most Western countries, less than 10 per cent of households have broadband connections.) About 25 million of South Korea's 48 million people are regular Internet surfers. All across Seoul, high-rise towers and corporate headquarters are emblazoned with their Web-site addresses in huge letters or neon signs. About 30 million South Koreans have cell phones, and 10 million of these cell phones have Internet connections -- again, a world-leading number.

III. Interest Group and Civic Group Activities in Korea

From State Corporatism through Pluralism to Societal Corporatism?

South Korea's interest representation system has been transformed from state corporatism to pluralism in the democratic transition process. Past authoritarian governments relied on state corporatism in order to control interest conflicts. Under South Korea's state corporatism, governments gained legitimacy and accomplished rapid economic growth by excluding labor groups from politics with oppressive regulations, implementing reciprocal exclusion between labor and capital, and consolidating the basis for industrialization by means of direct government involvement in the capital accumulation process. As an alternative, the Kim Young Sam government adopted pluralism to achieve an economic growth. This pluralism was more favorable to the business sector than other sectors in the context of a liberal market economy. Due to this structural limit the pluralistic approach on social integration between labor and business groups was not effective. Kim's globalization policy also resulted in relative overgrowth of the business sector and widening of inequality in income distribution. As a consequence, weakened governmental control and a strengthened business sector partially became one of major domestic sources which brought about the so-called "IMF economic crisis" at the end of 1997.

From the lessons of previous government and the severe financial crisis, the Kim Dae Jung government enforced economic structural adjustment in business and banking by a much fuller consultation between state and society. Faced with difficult situations internally and externally, it was necessary for the Kim Dae Jung government to maintain a consultative style of interest intermediation in order to implement smooth economic reform and reduce business-labor conflicts. Compared to the Kim Young Sam government's pluralistic approach on social pact, the Kim Dae Jung government's experiment can be regarded as a form of social corporatism. Although the Tripartite Commission did not correctly fit into a general form of social corporation because of structural problems like an unbalance among main actors and Commission's legal status, it is certain that the Kim Dae Jung government's new experiment intimated that a societal corporatist type of interest intermediation can be realized in South Korea.

Diversity of Interest Articulation

Korean society, which emerged as a full-fledged civil society in the early 1990s, has enjoyed remarkable growth in a wide range of specialized fields. As Korean society goes through the democratization from the mid-1980s, various interests which could hardly be expressed under

the rule of authoritarian government have been actively expressed by interest groups. In other words, a growing interest is taken in the manifestation of various interests within Korean society along with the progress of its political democracy. Under the authoritarian political system the civil society was subordinated to the state, but as the oppressive regime gradually lost its control over society, the interests of classes and functional interests that were produced and internalized as the result of industrialization began to enter the political process. Although conflicts and incidents have arisen from an excessive representation of special interests, a transitional phenomenon in the course of establishing a system provides outlets for a plurality of interests. The development of civil society has paved the way for the advent of well-grounded organizations that express the voices of diverse groups.

Noteworthy is the accelerated activation of citizen groups and public interest groups. These days citizen groups are being recognized as important political actors because of their active participation and the power of influence in the political process. The social and economic problems that are rapidly becoming political issues, such as, consumer protection, environment and women's rights, are not restricted to a certain social stratum, but they are public issues which directly affect the daily lives of every member of society. Based on this outlook, these groups have made efforts to bring those problems out into the open and have them resolved through the formation of public policy, while launching campaigns to attract the attention of the political parties, legislature, and the administration. Citizen groups, committed to advancing public interests during a confusing transitional process occurring in parallel with a consolidation of democratization, have thus played a leading role in the formation of a new order, such that their influence is expected to further expand to a broader variety of areas.

Therefore, the efforts made by citizen groups to transform those issues into public policies by raising them in the political process are viewed as very important in the pluralistic system of interest manifestation.

In order to organize newly expressed interests and to reflect them in the actual political process such as periodic elections, these citizen groups have been actively widening the scope of their operations in somewhat different ways from the existing interest groups which had shown 'state-corporatist' features in articulating interests.

One of the most conspicuous citizen organizations is the Citizen's Coalition of Economic Justice (CCEJ) which was established in 1989.⁷ Although the CCEJ's priority is economic issues, it has covered so many relevant issues in our society. In 1994, the People's Solidarity for

⁷ According to a 1993 Sisa Journal survey on the top influential organizations in Korea, the CCEJ ranked highest, while the Federation of Korean Industries and the Consumer's Protection Group and other groups followed.

Participatory Democracy (PSPD) was inaugurated with the purpose of realizing a participatory democratic society in Korea. This organization focuses on human rights issues and political democratization. The PSPD is believed to be the counterpart or competitor of the CCEJ in terms of its goals and membership. PSPD members tend to differentiate their organization from the CCEJ not only in terms of its major concern but also by its pattern of action, attitude toward political circles and relationship with class-oriented movements.

At the same time, ever more groups pursuing similar interests have also emerged as they jockey for position with one other. These groups, while maintaining a competitive relationship with each other, have managed to further diversify the methods through which particular interests can be promoted. They cooperate with each other on certain issues, while being on opposite sides in quest of similar interests at other times. Their emergence underlines the development of civil society and related ramifications by reflecting just how expansive the realm has become for effectively expressing group interests. This signifies that, within a pluralistic political system, diverse groups can coexist in their efforts to attain similar objectives through relationships with each other that are characterized by competition as well as cooperation on an even playing field.

In the mid-1980s, new groups, such as the Korea Trade Union Congress (全勞協, Jeonrohyeop), Korean Peasants League (全農, Jeonnong), and Korean Teachers and Educational Workers' Union (全教組, Jeonkyojo), were formed to challenge the dominance of existing organizations in their respective fields. These newcomer entities, though initially denied official recognition, persisted in their development efforts and were subsequently accepted by the establishment. Although they did not stand at the forefront of the conservative-progressive conflict from the outset, the potential for an ideological clash between these groups has steadily increased as both sides fully capitalize on freedom of thought and expression, which has expanded in line with Korea's ongoing democratization.

Groups in Electoral Process

One of the primary goals of citizen groups is to utilize elections to enlarge and strengthen their organizations, especially by raising issues and converting them into public policies. It is, however, somewhat dubious in practice whether citizen groups as a whole have successfully achieved their goals in recent elections. Besides, as the title of citizen groups implies, each of them commonly claims to be for fair and clean elections as a 'civil' objective. Against previous election irregularities such as regionalism, corruption and money-related wrongdoings in the

election process, they tried very hard to return to "normal" democratic political processes. In other words, they think the election should be competitive, mainly based upon policy debate rather than on other disrupting factors such as region, school and money. For that purpose, they tried, even if not so successfully, to hold policy-debate forums before the election.

They also listed important policies that must be legislated next Congress and pushed many candidates to sign to support them. Such policies are anti-corruption law, the labor law, the consumer-related law, and the water pollution law. Citizen organizations urged citizens to support candidates who support those reform legislations. In order for the citizens to make wise decision, citizen groups organized policy discussion meetings with candidates. In these meetings candidates from political parties had chance to differentiate their policies and citizens could compare and evaluate parties' and candidates' platforms.⁸

There was no distinctive difference in campaign strategies among the citizen groups. Even consumer groups and women's groups worked together during the campaign in order to enhance their group images and to pursue their general objectives. Even though this coalition is in the infant stage, this cooperative pattern should be taken as an encouragement for participating groups. A coalition campaign strategy will be developed to achieve each group's goals effectively and to put social issues on the public agenda.

The most conspicuous coalition was the activities and the influence of the Citizens' Coalition for the General Election (CCGE), that was indicative of the optimistic direction of civic movements relating to political reform. The organization grew rapidly in size and scope, and when it was officially disbanded in April 20, 2000, there were about 1,000 organizations under the CCGE umbrella. The CCGE had great influence in politics, especially for its efforts to gather information about corrupt candidates, and publish a list of disqualified candidates from both the ruling and the opposition parties. It helped voters' decision by providing information about illegal campaign, regional antagonism and corruption. In just three months, the anti-nomination and negative campaign had achieved amazing results.⁹ Moreover, this movement induced several politicians to retire and declare not to run for office any more. However, the most important achievement is the changes of voters' consciousness about election and politics. Citizens could criticize, watch, and influence on the old and structured

⁸ Since the 1995 local election, citizens' organizations jointly made slogans and have campaigned: Let's vote according to the policies of the candidate and party; Let's talk with our neighbors about the policy tasks proposed by the citizens' movement; Let's vote for the candidates who positively support these policy tasks.

⁹ The original goal was 50%. Fifty nine candidates out of eighty six candidates who are listed as not-good candidate could not win. It is 68.6%. In the 22 focused election districts, 15 candidates (68.2%) were defeated.

political cartel.¹⁰

Civic groups that had focused on illegal campaign surveillance changed their focus to policy examination in the 2002 presidential election. The Citizens' Alliance for the 2002 Presidential Election (CAPE) was composed of about 400 civic groups. The CAPE launched efforts to make the campaign a contest of policies. Among 100 reform agendas chosen by the CAPE, each candidate adopted some of them as public promises.¹¹ The CAPE also opened polling stations for absentee voters on college campuses and encouraged people to vote. These efforts helped to minimize legal debate of anti-nomination and negative campaign. CAPE also played a major role in encouraging the transparent use of campaign funds through actual investigations.

Civic groups' coalitions in electoral process have continued in Korea. The impact of such campaigning is, however, not so influential as it was because of their ideological tendency and narrow perspective of judgment. There has been harsh debate that the activities of civic groups have been politically biased. Especially, it was so hot when civic group alliance used the candidate's opinions on impeachment as the criteria for selecting targets of anti-nomination and negative campaign. The debate continues over the objectivity of these activities.

Traditional Interest Groups

In a capitalist civil society, business organizations are believed to be the major actor in the policymaking process, whether from the pluralist or corporatist perspective. Under the changing circumstances, the business community has tried to establish a new relationship with the state. Business interests have been articulated since the mid-1980s through the existing corporatist mechanism or through new pluralist units.

The Federation of Korean Industries (FKI) now has some bargaining power in negotiating with the government. With a more open economy and a more democratic regime in the 1990s, business groups could exercise their influence more freely and directly in the decision-making process.

It can be easily accepted that as democratization proceeds, policy networks become more complex and broad, and within those policy networks, government-business interaction tends to rely on consultation and coordination. The mutual relationship between the state and business is established by each side's strategic calculations. Now it is time to carefully watch the organized business power and activities themselves in the policymaking process apart from the dispute between state-centric and business-centric approaches.

¹⁰ For detail discussion see papers presented at the Korean Political Science Association conference in 2001, "The 16th General Election and Pathway of Korean Democracy."

¹¹ The ruling party's candidate Roh Moo-Hyun took 43; the lead opposing party's candidate, Lee Hoi-Chan

Another pillar of the traditional interests is labor interest. Since the mid-1980s, crucial change has occurred within the power balance of labor organizations. A new labor group, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), was established to challenge the then-existing industrial relations and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), which was regarded as a government-sponsored labor union. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) obtained its legal status through democratic struggles, while the FKTU cleared away its old image and made efforts to liberalize organizational structures and to create a new political goal. The emergence of these democratic labor forces became an important variable in the relations among labor, management and government. By legalizing the democratic labor movement, which had been excluded and strictly regulated under the past regimes, as a newly rising social force, it became possible for labor groups to participate in the decision making process.

Social Pact: Quasi-societal Corporatism

By the end of September 1997, stress on the foreign exchange market was evident. Many Japanese banks refused to roll over short-term loans in order to dress up their own income statements and Korea's exchange market began a steep decline in currency availability. The exchange rate then depreciated rapidly each day hitting its maximum allowable daily change. It had no credible remedy to prevent the economy from going into a free fall other than to ask the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to provide an emergency loan. Korea was obliged to accept the terms and conditions imposed by the IMF in order to resolve its financial crisis stemming from foreign exchange shortages and a stock market collapse.

The IMF financial crisis was a major blow that dramatically changed Korean society: public consumption and factory production plummeted; businesses and banks were required to structurally adjust and mass unemployment was imminent. The crisis also caused the transfer of power to the opposition political party and Kim Dae-Jung was elected as the second non-military president in December 1997. Overcoming the economic crisis was the first task of the new government. Learning a lesson from the previous government and the financial crisis, the Kim Dae-Jung government enforced economic structural reforms toward a more substantial market-oriented system.

Based on the philosophy that both a political democracy and a market economy could be developed simultaneously, the President tried to implement structural adjustments in the business and banking systems, not through an executive-dominated style, but through full consultations between state and society. Thus, in the early months of his tenure, President Kim

g took 26; and the DLP candidate, Kwon Young-Gil took 82.

Dae Jung forged a social pact among labor unions, business groups, and the government as an essential base for economic reform. This consultative method of economic reform was the first such experiment in Korean economic history. With open negotiations among business, labor and government, Koreans began to realize the importance of bargaining in order to solve internal and external conflicts. A more significant lesson from the financial crisis was that the international political economy was moving out of the Cold War era.

In recognition of the need for such social dialogue the Tripartite Commission was established on January 15, 1998. The tripartite agreement refers to consensus among the parties on all aspects of economic reform, not just the labor market. The Tripartite Commission was launched based on the social consensus that the IMF economic crisis which first resulted from the foreign exchange crisis could be overcome by a social agreement among business, government, and labor. In particular, all the economic parties agreed that the economic crisis was caused because all economic actors did not properly cope with changes in the new economic environment, and thus they should fairly share the burden to surmount the current difficulties.¹²

It is a historic event that provided the foundation for rebuilding Korea's economy. Domestically, it has reduced social unrest and conflict, creating consensus on the need for structural reform and burden sharing. They also agreed on the necessity of economic structural adjustment into a more transparent, open, and market-oriented economic system, and that economic reform measures should be implemented quickly and peacefully, with all actors assuming a fair share of the burden along with active participation and cooperation.

Externally, it played a major role in restoring the confidence of foreign investors and companies in the Korean economy, convincingly demonstrating the will and capability of the Korean people to overcome the economic crisis. It is true that the Kim Dae Jung government takes an advantage of its usefulness in the process of economic reform. The industrial relations that started from a very confrontational stage, have constantly cultivated the path toward social interaction and dialogue in a more complete form.

With such consequences, some critics argue that the European corporatism model does not go along with Korean industrial relations. The industrial relations system in Korea is severely decentralized and the overwhelming units of collective bargaining lie in the enterprises. As a result, without peak association per se, organizations of employers and trade unions do not hold

¹² Their efforts bore fruit with the Great Compromise on February 6, 1998, which included a 10-point agenda. The tripartite presidential advisory body managed to reach a compromise on the labor-management conflict caused by potential massive layoffs as a result of industrial restructuring. Winding up some 20 days of painstaking negotiations, they agreed on a ninety-point action plan designed to tide over the economic crisis.

strong enough leadership to negotiate on their members' behalf and to persuade them of the negotiated outcomes. Other critics argue that the social interaction scheme in Korea has structural deficiencies. The first defect is lack of a political party representing the constituency of working people. Most dominant parties adopt a catch all strategy without differentiating one from another in terms of political ideology.

Although there are so many problems in the Tripartite Commission in terms of is prerequisite condition for societal corporatist regime, the Tripartite Commission has played significant role in changing industrial relations, culture, and procedures.

IV. Obstacles to Overcome

Social Stratification and Ideological Conflicts

Increased political participation necessitates the processes of cleavage and conflict in society. Vested interests and rising interests are colliding in the realm of political, economic, social and cultural areas. Indeed, the outcome of these conflicts is closely related with the path of Korean democracy. Furthermore, current worldwide stratification has been generated by globalization and neo-liberalism. In that context, stratification is not unique to Korea. The IMF system, produced in response to the 1997 Asian foreign currency crisis, is the key factor of Korean stratification and the subsequent recession has perpetuated this economic situation. Stratification in Korea has increased dramatically in an unusually brief period of time due to both the unique infrastructure of the Korean economy and the effects of free trade. In the labor market, the wage gap between regular and irregular workers has widened and job security for the latter group is increasingly at risk. In particular, the number of irregular workers has increased dramatically in the aftermath of the IMF crisis. Income in the top 20 percentile has shown continuous growth while it has steadily declined in the lower 20 percentile. Income disparity between classes is increasing and the phenomenon of a collapse of the middle class is approaching. In seeking a solution, some suggest that corporations should increase investment, while others claim that a social safety net for the low-income group should be expanded through an increased social welfare budget.

Restoring healthy national competition and equal opportunity seems like an insurmountable problem. To increase the quality of life of its people, Korea must make great strides against current economic realities to slow and reverse the polarizing trend of stratification. Economic growth without employment and a widening gap between the nation's

rich and poor does not hold promise for the majority of Korea's citizens.¹³

With social stratification and cleavages, the ongoing confrontation between tradition-bound conservatives and reformed-oriented progressives has been further exacerbated. While it overlaps with the general discord along generational lines, which has intensified since the 2002 presidential election, the conservative-progressive confrontation has often taken place alongside class and regional struggles. It is generally a matter of course that, as a consequence of the development of a civil society, various forms and kinds of social strife will emerge. Politically, the issues are diverse and problematic, such as south-north Korean relations, the National Security Law, KORUS FTA, labor-management relations, equality in public education, and unemployment among the young.

Especially, ideological schism in regard to Korea's national division and unification involves the risk of developing into a serious conflict. While progressive pro-unification groups, armed with a strong organizational structure and action programs, often seem to more aggressively pursue their objectives, the counterattacks orchestrated by conservative groups are equally formidable.

Even though the discourse of the conservative-progressive conflict contains important political, economic, educational, and social issues, it is still underdeveloped and unorganized. Citizen groups are also transitional in nature in that it clearly displayed an inherent disunity and disparity of civil society. While the civic movement contributed to the cause of democratization, in helping to arouse the participation of citizens, it failed to properly reflect and address the discord, factional tendencies, and conflict that exist within civil society. Groups also failed to present a balanced picture of the conservative and progressive elements that exist in civil society.

The problem is the voices in the middle can barely be heard, while those of the extremes grow even louder. Black and white logic (those who are not with me are against me) still dominates. Unfortunately, the voices from the middle have been ignored in modern history. Those from the middle who attempt to coordinate have been marginalized. This is the sad history of the Cold War under military rule.

New Relationship among Political Actors

The development and diversification of civil society, which are essential for building a genuine democracy, involves a process that cannot be undertaken solely by civil society. Along with this evolution of civil society, an enhancement of the functions of the state and the political circles is needed to duly reflect and integrate the changes resulting from this process.

It should be noted that, despite the activation of civil society and rapidly growing influence of civic movements, the response of political actors, especially that of the National Assembly, was found to be lacking in the flexibility to accommodate and institutionalize the changes that have occurred in civil society. The legislature failed to dutifully perform its function of mediating public disagreement and facilitating a consensus-building process. A multitude of issues constantly raised by groups should be channeled to the parliament through political party mechanisms. However, should such a representative political system fail to function properly, a society's participatory political process runs the risk of creating serious social discord and reaching an impasse situation. If a political structure fails to properly convey major social problems to the legislative branch, there is a strong likelihood for antagonism and stalemate, in regard to sensitive issues that separate conservatives and progressives, to be prolonged amid mounting tension. Political parties, parliament, and the administration need to consolidate their efforts in order to settle the volatile conservative-progressive strife, and stop hoping that these problems will somehow take care of themselves.

The Congress appeared clueless as to how to perform its function of reconciling the diverse viewpoints of civil society or how to contribute to the attainment of a national consensus. Consequently, the ongoing conservative-progressive conflict, which has cast a dark shadow over Korean society of late, should not simply be seen as a passing phenomenon.

In order to alleviate various confrontations in civil society, the administration should undertake concerted efforts to build a broad consensus within society through a combination of persuasion and perseverance. The subjugation of ideological conflict and creation of a consensus among the general public are essential if the government hopes to successfully push forward with its policy. Especially critical is the need to hold productive debate on the issues involving the Legislature, which is instrumental in forging a national consensus and supra-partisan cooperation as well as rallying support for the implementation of the government's policies. Should all relevant issues be adequately deliberated and endorsed by the legislature in a proper manner, an efficient process based on interdependent and complementary cooperation between the government, civil society, and political parties could be established to deal with controversial policy issues.

Creation of Coordinating Leadership

Also of significance is the performance of the political leadership whose obligation is to alleviate and resolve such social disagreements. As long as a leader is the centripetal figure in

¹³ Park Wan-ki, "Economic Structural Reform Movement set to ease stratification," *CCEJ News*, 2006.2.22

political system, the function and results of the political system depend on the leader's will and ability. The leader's influence on political development is absolute. Harold Lasswell contends that democratic politics can avoid power abuse only through the selection of a qualified person and the exclusion of disqualified persons. Democracy and effectiveness should go side by side, meaning that the character and attitude of political leaders are very important. Social disputes are a necessary step for democratization. In transition, the important factor is leadership to coordinate social conflicts. Political leaders, from the president, the National Assembly members, party members and members of local self-governing administrations and social groups should exercise coordinating leadership in their respective areas. The absence of leadership and the bad behavior of power elites have crippled Korean politics.

The traditional character of Korean leadership is charismatic authority. Political charisma has been developed with bitter historical experiences such as Confucian tradition, colonization by imperial Japanese, and the division of the Korean peninsula. Political charisma was the core in all of these events. Charismatic rule can be evaluated in two aspects: positive and negative. On the positive side, strong leadership activates social potential and maintains unity. On the negative side, it can easily result in autocracy.

Unfortunately, militarism dominated Korean political culture during the Third, Fourth and Fifth Republics. Political leaders from the military classified the population into two groups: comrade or enemy. And they regarded opponents as enemies to be destroyed. It is natural for military soldiers to think of people in the middle as superfluous. Yet, long after democratization, black and white logic still works. That mentality must change immediately as it does not help to develop democracy.

V. Conclusion: For Sound Interest Group Politics and Civil Society

Since 1987, South Korean society has experienced democratization in terms of political, social, and economic arenas. As Schmitter argues, democratic consolidation means that democratic ideas and visions are internalized and habitualized among the public and political leaders. In particular, the development of the system that can control social conflicts through the democratic way is an essential factor for democratic consolidation. In the economic sector, an important change of the interest intermediation system was the emergence of social pact in South Korea. After democratization started, the past state or national corporatism as a way of controlling interest conflicts has been changed into either pluralism or societal corporatism.

Korean civil society, during the past thirty years when it germinated and has grown, has revealed its unprecedented dynamics and explosive power that have not been observed in other

countries. Under the transitional circumstances, however, Korean politics is stepping into democratic political apparatus from authoritarian, and Korean civil society also reflects its transitional features. The structure of civil society and the characteristics of civil movements are still in progress according to growth of democratization, international relation, and shift in the balance of power among individual and mass groups.

As the functions and roles of civil society are becoming more specialized now than ever, the organizations are now being assessed as entities that bring the nation and citizens together. The positive side admits that interest groups and citizen groups have been playing very positive roles in the democratization process. Many observers believe that groups in civil society are doing well their protective function against social illnesses and corruptions.

Along with such positive reviews, however, there exists a negative view towards group activities in general as well as the skepticism toward their authorities. Although more groups are active than ever, there is a view that the citizen's movements have been exaggerated in reality and that groups' recent activities have tendency to deviate from their founding objectives. Critiques argue that although the diverse groups in civil society are aware of their desires to participate actively in political processes, they have not been able to develop institutional mechanisms for constructive dialogue and bargaining.

Accepting the both positive and negative aspects of current civil society in Korea, a new perspective should be adopted to better understand the consequences that result from conflict and discord within civil society. According to conventional wisdom, an orderly civil society with cohesive solidarity is thought to be ideal. Such a viewpoint derives from a prevailing notion that civil society is an extension of pro-democracy and anti-authoritarianism movements, though the continued applicability of these efforts may be questioned today. Even if the value of these movements remains valid, what should be stressed is the reality that growth and development of civil society will invariably be accompanied by certain disagreement and friction. When a civil society acknowledges the inevitability of diverse internal consequences and fully utilizes its experiences and resources, the foundation can be laid for a truly pluralistic society, capable of dealing with social conflicts, including ideological strife.

Within this context, civil society should actively strive to accommodate its natural diversification and friction, without having them develop into extremism, while people need to acknowledge and coexist with those who maintain different ideological inclination and disposition. With twenty years of plural experience, Korean civil society should escape from its old central and elite-centered activities and to expand grass-root network. At the same time, abundant alternatives for the diversified and divided socio-political issues should be enriched. Once accumulated experiences and abilities of the civil society can be converged, it would be

rosy to realize political reform and settle down substantial democracy in Korea.

Reference

- Amsden, Alice and Euh, Y. 1990, "Republic of Korea's Financial Reform: What are the Lessons?," Discussion Paper, no.30, Geneva, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).
- Chang, Ha-Joon. 1998. "Korea: The Misunderstood Crisis," *World Development*, vol.26, no.8.
- Cheong, Byung-Gee. 2002. "Social and class cleavage in 2000 Presidential Election." paper presented in The Institute for Korean Politics.
- Cheong, Young-Tae. 2003. "On the Politics for Democracy and Equality." *NohDong SaHui* (February).
- Choi, Hee-Youn. 2002. "Structural Meaning of the Second Stage Democratization and the Future of Discourse for Political Reformation." Paper presented in the Conference for Evaluating 2000 Presidential Election.
- Choi, Jang-Jip. 1998. "The Conditions and Implication of Democratic Market Economy in Korea." *Criticism on Current Affairs* (Spring).
- Gills, Barry K and Dong-Sook S. Gills. 1999. "South Korea and Globalization: The Rise to Globalization?" *Asian Perspective*, Vol. 23, No. 4.
- Kang, Won-Taek. 2002. "Generation, Ideology, and Roh Moo-Hyun." *Gaegan SaSang* (fall).
- Kim, Min-Chung. 2004. "General Election in 2004 and Woman." Paper presented in the Conference 17th General Election and Woman.
- Kim, Samuel S. (ed) 2003. *Korea's Globalization*, Cambridge Asia-Pacific Studies Series. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kim, Young-Rae. 2004. "Outcomes of 17th General Election and Task of 17th National Assembly." in 17th General Election and the Future of Korean Politics (Documents of annual conference of Korean Election Studies Association).
- Lee, Chung Hee. 2010. *Interest Group Politics: Dynamics of Conflict and Integration* (Seoul: Ingansarang)
- Lee, Chung Hee and Sang Mook Lee. 2006. "Democratization and the Changing Pattern of Social Pacts in Korea." *Korea Observer*, Vol. 37, No. 2

- Lee, Chung Hee and Young-Rae Kim. 2004. *NGO and Korean Politics* (Seoul: Arche).
- Lee, Chung Hee. 2001. "Present and Future of Studies on Korean Civil Society." *50 years of Korean Political Science* (Seoul: Hanul).
- Lee, Jong-Ho. 1996. "Essay on State, Society, and Politics in Korea." in *Understanding Korean Civil Society* (Seoul: Hanul).
- Lee, Jong-Shik. 1999. "Agreements in Korean Tripartite Commission should be Guaranteed by Law." *Discourse 21* (Summer).
- Lee, Kwang-Il. 1998. "Unemployment and Politics: the Possibility of Tripartite Commission." *Criticism on Politics* (Fall/Winter).
- Thomas, Clive S.(ed). 1993. *First World Interest Groups: A Comparative Perspective*.(Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press)
- Yoon, Jin-Ho. 1999. "Possibility of Korean Corporatism." Paper presented at the conference of Korean Association of Social Economics.