

# Growth and Crisis of the Korean Citizens' Movement

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## Abstract

*Differing from the previous movement in terms of objective and approach, the citizens' movement is closely connected to the political opposition that existed during the military dictatorship period. Contrary to the citizens' movements of other advanced countries, especially those of Japan, the Korean citizens' movement has tended to put heavier emphasis on political transformation than on the everyday lives of people. Among Korean civil organizations, however, while some groups are similar to those of the New Social Movements in terms of their objectives and philosophy, others are not. These "comprehensive" citizens' movement organizations implicitly set macro-structural changes in Korean society as their goal, believing that their mission was the criticism of Seoul-based national politics. Although the movement enjoyed rapid growth from the 1990s, a sense of crisis spread to the activists after the advent of Korea's economic crisis, the establishment of civilian governments, and globalization. Along with these, limited human resource pools or the so-called "crisis of reproducing the citizens' movement activists" also cannot be ignored.*

**Keywords:** citizens' movement, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), New Social Movements (NSM), comprehensive citizens' movement, neoliberalism, institutionalization, global civil society

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## Introduction

Following the collapse of military regimes in 1987, Korean society witnessed the popularization of the concept of “civil society,” and the vocabularies of “civil movements” or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have since gained familiarity. Even in the pre-1987 period, undoubtedly, there were some groups, including the YMCA and the Heungsadan (Young Korean Society), which were similar to today’s citizens’ groups or NGOs. In addition, civil society, during the time, found itself to sprout alongside capitalist industrialization, the formation of urban middle class, and the growth of media in Korea. However, it is widely recognized that it was democratization that caused the flowering of civil society in Korea, not vice versa.

The collapse of the military regimes activated the Gramscian concept of “political society,” the arena of political parties or political activity, and further consolidated civil society. During this time, labor unions were organized, many kinds of civil social organizations were established, alternative media emerged, and diverse forms of community movements were also founded. In particular, during the mid-1990s, civil organizations related to women, the environment, and human rights got off to a start, and many grassroots organizations formed alongside the launch of the local self-governance system.

According to the *Hanguk min-gan danche chongnam* (Directory of Korean NGOs, 2000), the number of civil organizations almost doubled within the three years of 1996 to 1999. By specific field, the majority fell under the category of “civil society,” which far exceeded the number of groups categorized under the title of “social service” and “culture-related” groups.<sup>1</sup> It can be determined from this that the increase in the number of national and local NGOs was key to the numerical increase of civil groups.<sup>2</sup> Even more noteworthy than this

1. *Hankyoreh*, October 20, 2000.

2. Interest groups, community groups, and corporations can be excluded, though they are included in the broader term of NGOs. NGOs can be broadly divided into two categories: one is “groups for social service,” the other “activist organizations.” This paper is primarily concerned with the latter type. For types of NGO,

quantitative growth is the increase in the influence of civil groups or citizens’ movements. It is widely accepted that NGOs are no less important than government or businesses in contemporary society. In Korea, in particular, these civil social organizations have exerted great influence on various matters, including the formation of public opinion, policy planning, elections, and social reforms. A survey conducted in 2001 found that citizens’ groups were ranked as the fourth most influential group,<sup>3</sup> and one survey (2004) reported that citizens’ groups were the most influential in Korea, surpassing the popular sway of political parties.<sup>4</sup>

However, over recent years, Korea’s citizens’ movement suffered various internal hardships. The globalization of capitalist accumulation as well as neoliberal social and economic policy in Korea since the 1997 economic crisis, have required repositioning of the substance, objectives, strategy, and method of the citizens’ movement. In addition, external factors—political parties, government, and businesses—that influence the substance and scope of the citizens’ movement have changed greatly. Thus, it can be said that the Korean citizens’ movement has entered the stage of restructuring its societal role, while already passing the rapid expansion found in its early stage. It is therefore undeniable that activists who have engaged in the citizens’ movement feel that the current situation is one of crisis.

With this in mind, this paper examines the characteristics of the Korean citizens’ movement that was active following the 1990s, along with the movement’s contribution to democratization of Korean society. The paper then investigates the current status of the citizens’ movement and the challenges it faces.

see Cho Hee-Yeon (2000, 129).

3. *Sisa Press*, October 25, 2001. This survey was conducted for 1,014 specialists of ten fields.

4. *Sisa Press*, October 18, 2004: 58. According to the survey, the rate of respondents who thought civil groups to be the most influential was 28.9%, which was followed by the ruling Uri Party 23.7%, and the press, 18.1%.

## Characteristics of the Korean Citizens' Movement and NGOs

### *Growth of the Korean Citizens' Movement*

The Korean citizens' movement became a full-fledged one with the appearance of several citizens' movement organizations, including the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) on July 8, 1989. The Korean citizens' movement has played a distinct role, a parallel for which cannot be found in other countries. As in other social movements, in order to clearly understand the characteristics of the citizens' movement, it is necessary to trace the following elements: the historical trajectory of Korean society, the politico-social structure of Korea after the end of military rule, and the changes to social movements at the global level following the end of the Cold War and globalization.

As far as the "Korean citizens' movement" is concerned, the concept of "citizen" in the Korean case is not only related to the subjects who are engaged in the movement, but epitomizes its objectives and orientation. The term "citizen" has, above all, been used in contrast to the *minjung*, a concept appropriated by Korean social movement activists since the 1970s. "Citizen" in Korea thus articulates the ideological orientation and objectives of the movement, which differs not only from those of the revolutionary political movement but also from radical political activism. Furthermore, the concept of citizen can also be defined as the antithesis to various forms of movements that pursued regime change, while being based on theories of national liberation and people's democracy in the 1980s. The concept of citizen also marks an attempt to consolidate the democratization movement into the level of institutional reforms, and to expand democratization to the social and economic realms.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars point out that the citizens'

5. It can be found in the CCEJ's inaugural declaration: "Under our organization, not only the isolated and the oppressed gather together. Those who bear good will can also be important actors in our movement. If they have good intentions, whether they be businessmen or belong to the middle class, they can be members of the movement." See CCEJ (1990).

movement shares an affinity with middle-class interests—instead of advocating for the interests of socially underprivileged groups. However, it can be said that the citizens' movement revealed above all the discontinuity in objectives and orientation from the radical movement, one marked by its pursuit of political struggle, regime change, and class struggle that prevailed in Korea throughout the 1980s.

The Korean citizens' movement first appeared when criticism of the labor movements and national liberation movements began to lose their footing following the demise of real socialism. Thus, it is true that the Korean citizens' movement has grown within a global context, in which similar liberal civil movements in other regions, including the West, have been found. In this regard, the concept of "citizen" is an ideology, and it conflicts with the concepts of class and *minjung*. However, from the historical perspective of Korean democratization, the Korean citizens' movement began to take full form when Korean political democratization had already progressed somewhat; when South Korea secured the advantage in "regime competition" with North Korea, with anti-foreign and national unification movements losing their ground (due to the North-South economic exchange and South Korean enterprise's active role in that exchange); and when the need was felt to expand democracy to other sectors of society, including parliament, court, administration, and enterprises. Although the citizens' movement organizations since the 1990s represent a broad ideological spectrum, it can still be said that they shared a starting point with each other. Insofar as the activists who engaged in the democratization movement of the 1970s and 1980s played a decisive role in the citizens' movement, the movement is an extension of the 1980s democratization movement on the one hand and a critical overcoming of it on the other.

More concretely, while distancing itself from previous movements in terms of objective and approach, the citizens' movement is closely connected to the political opposition that existed during the military dictatorship. The start of the Korean citizens' movement can be traced back to the democratization movement that strived to reform Seoul-based national politics. From the 1990s, although the

main citizens' organizations used the term "citizen" as rhetoric, their main interest was in changing the socio-political system at a macro-level. A considerable number of leaders came from the student movements, and they were active in producing the discourse on the term "citizen." As such, the Korean citizens' movement reflects the history and ongoing state of Korean civil society, which itself was a result of the 1987 struggle for democratization. Historically, students and intellectuals were the main agents in the Korean democratization movements. It was very difficult to find people at the grassroots level who were directly engaged in national politics and the local community, which greatly defined the nature and activity of Korean citizens' organizations. For that reason, few people among the general populace were involved in the citizens' groups, which have been primarily managed by a few notable personalities. Accordingly, these groups suffered difficulties in terms of financial and human resources.<sup>6</sup> The Korean citizens' movement has yet to succeed in taking root on the grassroots level because civil society continues to be deeply conditioned by politics on the one hand and familism and cronyism on the other.<sup>7</sup>

From this, it can be deduced that the most important variables influencing the nature and direction of the Korean citizens' movement are historical and political conditions.

#### *Two Currents of the Korean Citizens' Movement*

Some saw the Korean citizens' movement after the 1990s as something similar to the so-called New Social Movements that appeared in

6. The Third Sector Institute at Hanyang University conducted a survey as to the current status of financial and human resources for citizens' groups. According to the survey, citizen participation ranked only 1.3 points out of 3 points, citizens' and resources were more vulnerable at 1.1 points. Nonetheless, the policy influence of the groups was rated as high, at 2.5 points. *Dong-a Ilbo*, June 17, 2005.

7. *JoongAng Ilbo*, February 2, 2001. The participation rate for adult citizens was 10-20%, far lower than that of the British and American cases (50-69%). For the impact of familism on citizens' awareness and participation, see Kim (2002).

Europe and the United States.<sup>8</sup> Among Korean civil organizations, however, while some groups are similar to those of the New Social Movements in terms of their objectives and philosophy, others are not. The New Social Movements prioritize the penetration of democracy into everyday life rather than the securing of state power, the pursuit of the values of post-materialism, employment of an identity-based mobilization strategy rather than catering to the interests of the masses, and emphasis on voluntary participation and networks rather than a centralized organization.<sup>9</sup> Green Korea United (GKU) and Korea Women's Associations United (KWAU) may be seen as typical organizations that formed their basis on these values and strategies.<sup>10</sup> However, most Korean citizens' movements bear a stronger similarity to democratization movements than to Western-type New Social Movements, as they are heavily preoccupied with political transformation and national politics.

Thus, I call citizens' movement here not only a political or "comprehensive" (*jonghap*) citizens' movement that bears a strong continuity with the past political movements, but also a new type of social movement that is clearly differentiated from it. The leading figures of the former are the activists who were engaged in the democratization movement during the 1970s and 1980s, and most of them were once student activists formerly committed to the radical regime change movement (National Alliance for Democracy and Reunification of Korea) or labor movement. However, disillusioned by nationalist or socialist alternatives, they gathered under the new banner of "citizen." In Korea, politics has been powerfully centralized and the state has always been very strong, as they were primarily formed against the background of national division of 1945 and economic development since the 1960s. As a result, it was very difficult for citizens' groups or organizations to build up their effectiveness enough to compete with political actors. In Korean society, all economic and

8. Cho D. (1996).

9. Offe (1985, 52-54).

10. See <http://www.greenkorea.org>; <http://www.women21.or.kr>.

social issues tended to converge into political dynamics. Thus, citizens' movement activists of the 1990s came to believe naturally that the most urgent task of social reform could be accomplished by bringing about political reforms.

These "comprehensive" citizens' movement organizations implicitly set as their goal macro-structural changes in Korean society, believing that their mission was the monitor of Seoul-based national politics. Given that party politics was corrupt and incompetent, and failed several times to reflect the needs and demands of citizens through party integration among conservatives, it is likely that the citizens' movement played the role of representative bodies, which the institutional political parties failed to do. Two examples are the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD). The Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 General Election, which was led by these comprehensive citizens' movement groups including the PSPD, was originally initiated by the campaign for the National Assembly watch in the PSPD. But as it facilitated changes to the political topography, it can be seen as having been a part of the political citizens' movement. Although the CCEJ and PSPD have habitually stressed the importance of ordinary citizens' participation in governmental decision-making processes and local politics, they actually set policy-making as their primary goal, which distanced them from the grassroots movement. The strategies of these groups were similar to those of the previous democratization movement, as their key actors were intellectuals or elites. In other words, rather than being similar to the New Social Movements or NGOs, the Korean citizens' movement began to appear at the same historical time that class politics and interest group politics became full-fledged in the Korean context.<sup>11</sup>

Unlike the previous movement that pursued regime change, these 'comprehensive' citizens' movement organizations have adopted as their strategies the filing of lawsuits, petitioning for legislation,

11. There are some scholars who identify the Korean citizens' movement with the new social movement. For this, see Cho D. (1996).

presenting policy alternatives, and dealing with various civil affairs. They do not strive to reorganize state power or government anymore. They recognize the existence of political circles and the government, but criticize their arbitrary, illegal, and irrational operations. As these organizations have played a role in monitoring and checking the power monopoly found in the legislative, judiciary, and executive-branches, it is likely that they have much in common with the previous democratization movement. However, they also clearly demonstrate a liberal stance in that they emphasize the restoration of individual rights and the filing of lawsuits.

Thus the Korean citizens' movement differs from the previous anti-regime democratization movement in that the former pursues institutional reform instead of pursuing the radical transformation of the institutional. It also differs from the new European-type New Social Movements in that the citizens' movement goes beyond the goal of reforming civil society in order to focus on national political reform. The meaning of democratization pursued by the Korean citizens' movement entails not only a completion of political democratization, which has not yet been consolidated since the June Uprising of 1987, but a qualitative upgrading of the level of democracy through economic and social democratization (including overcoming regionalism and familism). Judiciary reform, a National Assembly watch, and both anti-corruption and minority rights campaigns are all enlarged parts of this politically oriented movement, and therefore cannot be said to have found their philosophy and values in the New Social Movements of the West.

The second current of the citizens' groups includes the Korean variants of New Social Movements, a grassroots movement, and a fundamentalist community movement besides the above-mentioned environmental and women's movements. Korean society has seen these kinds of New Social Movements and local residents' participatory movements become active since the mid-1990s. The latter, as in the previously cited Western case, presented new concepts of politics and rights in the realms of everyday life and gender. The most prominent cases to appear during the 1990s were the women's and envi-

ronmental movements. These two movements paved the way for creating new discursive spaces and opened new horizon for democratization and social development. These movements tried to some degree to distance themselves from the intellectual-led, national politics. While transcending the strategies of putting pressure on the state and governmental bodies, they showed a deep interest in resolving problems through the mobilization of grassroots civil society.

Recently, we can see the combination of residents' participation and new community values. In Buan-gun county, Jeollabuk-do province, on February 14, 2004, residents voted in an attempt to upgrade local issues through the life culture movement. The civic movement established a residential voting committee and, based on donations, successfully carried out a residential poll. Some considered this a form of autonomous democracy that went beyond mere participatory democracy. The residents' movement that began with the anti-nuclear waste site movement finally developed to the extent that residents could determine their own issues, autonomously suggest policy, decide public opinion, and observe how their recommended policies were implemented. In the process, it was noteworthy that women, a new collective societal actor, played a crucial role in these political processes, which was interpreted as being partly due to their maternal affection for their children.<sup>12</sup> In short, the Korean citizens' movements, which have been often represented by several "comprehensive" citizens' movement organizations, have very diverse goals, orientations, and methods that also reveal some traits in common with other movements.

Contrary to the citizens' movements of other advanced countries, especially those of Japan, the man Korean citizens' movement has tended to put heavier emphasis on political transformation than on the everyday lives of people.

12. Ko (2005, 250-252).

## The Citizens' Movement and the Development of Democracy in Korea

### *Democratization of the State*

Korea has been often referred one of countries that succeeded in democratization among countries that implemented nation-building and industrialization following World War II. This success was made possible mainly due to the perseverance of anti-dictatorship struggles waged by students and intellectuals, but it cannot be denied that the citizens' movement since 1987 also greatly contributed to the consolidating political democracy. To reiterate what has been mentioned above, the citizens' movement played a large role in gradually reforming the state and consolidating democracy following the era of military dictatorships and the anti-dictatorship democratization movement.

From a historical viewpoint, there have been two paths to democracy: one through revolution, struggle for national liberation, regime change, and a resistant social movement, and the other, the revitalization of political parties and the consolidation of civil society that can be seen in the establishment of labor unions and voluntary associations.<sup>13</sup> The former path was likely to appear following the collapse of feudal systems, colonial regimes, and military regimes in Latin America and Asia since the 1970s. However, both paths could not be freely chosen at a given historical stage. Rather, the question as to which path was to be opted for might have depended upon the existing ruling structure, or how property owners maintained or protected their property, power, and authority. In particular, the second path was only able to be effective when freedom of the press was guaranteed, public opinion allowed to freely form, and legal and institutional legitimacy gained. The second path has been usually found in advanced capitalist economies since the twentieth century.

13. For the argument that the density of civil society is an important foundation on which democracy can progress, see Rueschemeyer et al. (1997).

It is roughly divided into two different types: the strengthening of the political party system (European type) and the emergence of interest groups and voluntary associations (United States type). In the former case, parliament had to secure its key position in power distribution, and the latter was made possible when individuals' keen awareness of rights and procedural legitimacy such as legal fairness were guaranteed.

Based on this categorization, the Korean citizens' movement played a critical role in shifting Korea from the former type to the latter. It was only before the 1990s that the Korean democratization movement was able to make progress in the pro-democracy struggle by changing ruling elites while relying on the former type. Under military dictatorship, the political party system, governmental activity watch, and citizens' political participation could not be ensured because the resistance was itself the object of oppression, freedom of the press was limited, and priority was given to national security in a way that hampered people's ability to control and check those in power. Until 1987, therefore, it was very difficult to find interest groups or labor unions, not to mention civic groups, were permitted to organize themselves and actively engage in socio-political affairs. However, the NGOs that began to appear from the 1990s tried to call for state reform and took control of the political arena and government while utilizing policy planning, filing lawsuits, and petitioning for the passage of legislation, rather than relying on resistance methods alone. Exploiting the underdevelopment of party politics and representative democracy, NGOs engaged in many activities, including administration watches, election watches, anti-corruption campaigns, and legislative petitions. They went further to pursue their agendas in local politics and a grassroots citizens' movement on a local basis, the goal of which was to democratize "the politics of everyday life." Since 1990, the Korean citizens' movement has made a contribution to the reinforcement and deepening of democracy while succeeding the previous political democratization movement. The movement's contributions include:

- 1) Asking the administrative and parliamentary branches to make their activities transparent by the inspection of state affairs, National Assembly watch, and demanding the opening of public information. They laid formal complaints before the police regarding irregularities and corruption among political circles and requested that they correct their policy mistakes or wrongdoings, thus making it impossible for those in power to accept only some interest groups, including the *jaebeol*;
- 2) Engaging in various governmental commissions, in particular, special commissions, or releasing dissenting opinions while working outside the commissions, thus, preventing only a few dominant groups from realizing their purpose and favoring public interest;
- 3) Petitioning legislation that addressed citizens' complaints and needs, and pressing legislators to actively implement legislation, including the Anti-Corruption Act;
- 4) Overseeing how administrative organizations expended their budgets, checking whether public officials were corrupt in their private sector contracts, and watching local government elections and activities; and
- 5) Stimulating citizens' interest in public activities through participation and training programs, thereby promoting public awareness.

Their most representative achievements, however, were the Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 General Election and Anti-Impeachment Campaign in 2004. Civic organizations involved in the election utilized negative campaigning techniques—defeating unqualified electoral candidates to bring about a substantial power shift, which can be assessed as a culminating point of unrealized democratization.

The reason the Korean citizens' movement stressed the strengthening and firming of democracy by that means was not only because they thought the old power elites still stood intransigently against

resigning, but because the parliamentary system and political parties were not consolidated yet. Also, the leaders of the movement saw the fairness in legal procedures was not guaranteed, and the administration was failing to serve the needs of the citizenry. In particular, citizens' sufferings after experiencing the economic crisis of 1997 were aggravated by the lack of both democracy and equalized tax distribution under the IMF bailout system and neoliberal economic policy. In other words, the market system forced upon Koreans by the IMF in exchange for a bailout package could not automatically weaken state power, bureaucratism, and political corruption. Indeed, the end of the military regimes and the weakening of an oppressive state apparatus did not mean the strengthening of civil society. The Korean citizens' movement organizations believed that local politics, grassroots democracy, and economic and social democracy could be guaranteed only with the realization of parliamentary, judicial, and administrative democratization.

The blooming of civil society that came with the end of militarism did not inherently create the culture of citizens' participation. This was because Korea had a long tradition of statism, with the state monopolizing the allocation of national resources through the use of coercive power and taxation. As such, prior to the democratization of civil society, the most important effort was that of transforming the oppressive state to a democratic one under the Cold War order (i.e., democratization of the state). Given the many problems found in the government's activities—including corruption, waste of financial resources, unnecessary regulation, inefficient financial expenditures (arms purchases and defense), biased support of government-sponsored groups, and the aggrandizement of bureaucratic organizations—it was not easy to stress only the active role of civil society while ignoring the necessary role of the state in efforts to fundamentally change the distorted allocation structure of national resources, which was an outcome of the Cold War, North-South confrontation, and development dictatorship.

### *Democratization of the Market*

Civil society during the post-democratization period can be dubbed as one framed by the struggle of "civil society vs. civil society," as postulated by Professor Choi Jang Jip.<sup>14</sup> The key issues here are how NGOs can check the capital that has gained tremendous influence, and how they can act in favor of grassroots citizens against the increasing power of the press and the expanding interests of capital.

The citizens' movement has been often referred to as a "third sector," independent of political power and capital. In Korea, while it was assumed to be a politically oppressed sector under military dictatorship, after the advent of civilian government, it has been considered capable of curbing the power of capital. Under the terms of the IMF and the Kim Dae-jung administration, large conglomerates and the *jaebeol* grew more powerful. Large conglomerates became so influential that the Roh Moo-hyun administration has been conceived of as underpinning the *jaebeol*-state alliance.<sup>15</sup> As can be found in the fact that Samsung, a private firm, is responsible for the training of high government officials, the Korean public sector since the 1990s has been very active in learning from this conglomerate, and it is in such ways that the power of private businesses has overwhelmed the public sector in all fields. The Samsung Economic Research Institute, for example, exerts a significant influence on the governmental policy agenda-setting process. According to a survey conducted by the *JoongAng Ilbo*, Samsung ranked first among 23 power groups in the categories of influence and credibility, with the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) being ranked 12th and 8th, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

Not only in Korea, but globally, economic democratization has appeared to be a more central agenda than state and political democracy. In particular, since the collapse of socialist or military regimes,

14. Choi (2005a).

15. Choi (2005b).

16. *JoongAng Ilbo*, May 25, 2005.



the most urgent issue regarding democracy within a capitalist political economy can be summarized as that of how to protect socially vulnerable groups under the neoliberal economic order. As has been widely recognized, since businesses' activities of profit-making and market hegemony—in particular, owner and management's decisions regarding investment—are fundamentally related to the principle of efficiency rather than democracy, it is likely that such activities may result in an anti-social outcome. Although capitalism is undeniably founded upon the private ownership of property, if this property is regarded as being infringed upon, it may conflict with the principle of democracy, thereby causing capitalism to fall into crisis. For this reason, in advanced capitalist countries, business watch campaigns have become active, as well as campaigns for the democratization of governing structures within businesses.

However, it is most likely that these citizens' organizations, not to mention labor unions, lose ground under a globalized economy and neoliberal system. It is not only small- and medium-sized enterprises that are put under severe international competition and face threats to their survival. Large companies are not exempt from these challenges, either. Then, it is unlikely that democratic control will be imposed on market power, and there is little room for civil society to do anything.

In this regard, economic democratization and business watch campaigns can be interpreted as efforts to enable the state and civil society to take control of capital accumulation, and to level the playing field for economic agents. These efforts included CCEJ's "real name system" and the idea of "public land," as well as PSPD's minority shareholder campaign. Undoubtedly, anti-social capital accumulating activities and the market hegemony of the *jaebeol* are supervised and controlled at the state level through the establishment of social dialogue mechanisms such as the Tripartite Commission, the guaranteeing of laborers and shareholders' participation in management, business democratization, consumers' ex post control, and so on. However, the Tripartite Commission, which brings together labor, business, and government, has not been successfully implemented or

experimented with in Korea. Labor's involvement in management has also not been officially allowed. The minority shareholders' campaign that aims for democratization of the corporate governance structure is in an initial stage. Although the minority shareholders' campaign was limited by its dependence on the interest of the shareholders, it promoted public awareness and contributed to enhancing businesses' management transparency<sup>17</sup> by showing that even the *jaebeols'* governance, which had been thereto considered sanctified, could also be placed under the scrutiny of shareholders. However, some have criticized the minority shareholders' campaign as transplanting a U.S.-style stockholder capitalism on behalf of foreign capital, while the leaders of this campaign counteracted this criticism in that it may accordingly make it easier for *jaebeol* to dominate the Korean economy.

NGOs pursuing economic democracy exist as a "self-defense of society," as termed by Karl Polanyi.<sup>18</sup> Welfare states, labor parties, and labor unions were products of organized laborers' long resistance, but they failed to improve the living conditions of socially vulnerable groups and the working poor. Consequently, the need was felt to break down the exploitative structure imposed on marginal laborers, ethnic minorities, the poor, and women in underdeveloped countries in order to build the new type of social movements, which is a goal that Korean NGOs have tried to achieve.

The Korean citizens' movement, therefore, should also strive to be independent from not only political but business power. Whether the movement can obtain its independence from business became a key issue that is closely connected to the question of whether the

17. Minority shareholders are the owners of a company, but only nominally so. They are not involved in the important decision-making processes of a company, such as establishing the executive board and making investment decisions. The minority shareholders' campaign was designed to elect executive board members who would represent minority shareholders and confirm that an enterprise is indeed controlled by shareholders—not by a *jaebeol* family, which owns only 10% of the total stock.

18. Polanyi (1991).

movement can survive after the development of market capitalism in Korea.

It has been pointed out that in order to realize true democratization, the Korean citizens' movement has stressed state or political reform, rather than adopting a gradual "bottom-up" approach. In the same manner, economic democracy represented by control of the market has no alternative but to focus on institutional reform at the national level. More concretely, it was necessary to transform the Tripartite Commission into an organization pursuing social dialogue, where national issues including *jaebeol* or financial reform—all issues that greatly affect labor and citizens—can be discussed. As each governmental organization, including the Financial Supervisory Commission, the Korea Independent Commission Against Corruption, and an environmental impact evaluation agency under the Ministry of Environment, was an agency that aimed to supervise individual enterprises or *jaebeol*, civil organizations considered the supervision and control of these agencies to be no less important than those of individual large conglomerates.

#### *Joining the Building of a Global Civil Society*

With the acceleration of globalization from the 1990s, the more active role played by international civil society or transnational non-governmental organizations has been expected to resolve many issues of poverty, unemployment, the environment, human rights violations, and war, which have so far been addressed mainly by the state. In accordance, the Korean citizens' movement has placed more emphasis on these international issues from the mid-1990s than before. Many international organizations, for example, are striving to eliminate poverty in developing countries. In Korea as well, beginning with the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA), many organizations such as World Vision, the Korean Committee for UNICEF, and Global Civic Sharing have helped rehabilitate impoverished groups in Africa, Vietnam, Iraq, and Brazil.

Since 2000, some parts of the Korean citizens' movement has

turned its attention to international society to try and resolve the problems held in common by humankind. Activists in the movement participated in WTO meetings and World Social Forum,<sup>19</sup> engaged in campaigns to defeat unqualified electoral candidates, and strove for solidarity among Asian societies,<sup>20</sup> worked for construction of the Center for Peace Museum,<sup>21</sup> and gathered aid for impoverished people in Africa. The Korean anti-war campaign has yet to go beyond the boundaries of the state and nation, but anti-war activists did show interest in international solidarity. The campaign against the dispatch of Korean troops to Iraq was significant not only because the Korean citizens' movement was expressing anti-Americanism and a will toward peace, but also because it meant that they had become interested in international issues, such as U.S. hegemony in a globalized world. The most heated, controversial issue might be the campaign against additional dispatches of Korean troops to Iraq and the anti-Iraq War campaign. Aware of the fact that many problems cannot be solved at the state level, the Korean citizens' movement is trying to turn its attention first to the neighboring Asian region.

19. At the World Trade Organization (WTO) conference of 2003 in Cancun, Mexico, some Korean citizens' group and peasants rallied to protest against global trade talks. One Korean farmer screamed "WTO kills farmers before taking his life." And Korean activists rallied with Korean farmers across the country in October of 2005 to protest the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Busan, where WTO agricultural policy was one of the key topics tabled there. In the World Social Forum of January 2004 at Mumbai, Korean activists campaigned to stop the crackdown on migrant workers with Asian comrades. It is not difficult to find Korean activists in the protest movements on the issue of globalization in the world.

20. This was mainly organized by Korea's PSPD, and based on Korea's successful experience of Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 General Election and Anti-Impeachment Campaign (2004). Koreans took a crucial role at the Asian Domestic Observers Forum of 2004 that focused on election watching.

21. The Center for Peace Museum in Korea aimed to create the spaces of sharing the pain of others in order to foster a more popular and participatory peace education and movement. The leaders of the organization were concerned about the Korean soldier's wrongdoings in the Vietnam War and campaigned to apologize the incidents for Vietnamese. See [http://peacemuseum.or.kr/Eng\\_main.htm](http://peacemuseum.or.kr/Eng_main.htm).

### **Crisis of the Citizens' Movement and Its New Effort at Self-Transformation**

#### *Institutionalization*

Civilian governments such as both the Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung administrations provided favorable conditions for the citizens' movement but also, in some respect, made it difficult for it to criticize them openly. The two administrations assumed themselves to be successors to democratization while believing they deserved the support of all reform-minded forces, including citizens' movement activists, and further tried to appoint activists to governmental posts. As part of showing a positive response, some activists actually joined the governments. Since the Kim Dae-jung administration, former democratization movement activists divided into three groups according to the extent to which they supported the civilian government: supportive, conditionally supportive, and critical. Here, some of the supportive or conditionally supportive groups were engaged in political activities, and other specialists who had been engaged in the citizens' movement participated in various committees under the Kim Dae-jung administration. At the local level, some heads of local government tried to share policy responsibility with civic organizations. Meanwhile, the critical group looked to building an independent labor party.

In the process, the neutrality and independence pursued by the citizens' movement came to be threatened when the capability of the movement and its performances were institutionalized and the movement's leaders began to play an advisory or directing role in governmental policy-making. Thus, debate over the independence or "moral purity" of the movement appeared, fuelled by criticism that viewed the citizens' movement as one partner of the government or as organizations that supported the government. This debate offered a space for conservatives to launch a total attack on the citizens' movement.<sup>22</sup>

22. Some point to the low rate of participation of citizens' movement activists in gov-

Though maintaining the "purity" of an NGO would be detrimental to sustaining the social legitimacy and integrity of citizens' movement, the argument that it should not involve itself in real politics might be regarded as a kind of political ideology raised by conservatives who viewed the citizens' movement negatively in Korean context.<sup>23</sup> This is why the argument has come out from the conservatives as an ill-intentioned criticism against the citizens' movement. Many former activists who had occupied governmental posts or entered the political arena could not evade the criticism that they had monopolized the achievement of the movement rather than systematically conveying their original ideas or vision into the policy-making process in the government and political parties in emphasizing its rationale. Consequently, they could only partly succeed in institutionalizing its original slogans or demands, and allowed the citizens' movement activists to be blamed for their individual behaviors. In short, the former activists' participation in institutionalized politics operated as a burden on the citizens' movement, thereby causing the foundation upon which the movement stood to shrink.

In order to realize the needs or demands of citizens, it is natural for the movement to align itself with institutional politics. However, based on the Korean experience, if the leaders could not endure the enticement of politicization or institutionalization, the movement would face a backlash. It has been pointed out that many NGOs in Europe and Japan eventually became bureaucratized, and many have acted as agents of governmental projects. In particular, financially

ernmental posts. In 2001, for example, 474 committees were operating under 40 governmental ministries, and among former activists, those who participated in the committees totaled only six.

23. The discourse of "purity" of the agency of social movements has had a very peculiar meaning in the Korean context. Under the long oppressive anticommunist regime, only "pure" students or intellectuals, who were believed to have no intention to obtain some political or material benefits, have been socially recognized as believable actors in political protest. In this circumstance, "purity" was equal to being disinterested in politics or material gain. Thus praising the "purity" of the protestors may reflect the oppressive ruling system that does not permit the people's (workers, peasants, and other interest groups) to intervene in politics.

vulnerable groups tend to rely heavily on governmental fund, and activists find themselves becoming project planners and rapporteurs instead. Since 1999, The Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs and local governments subsidized NGOs on project base. The conservatives and mainstream media, then, blamed the policy as a kind of collusion between government and citizens' movements. On the other hand, some NGOs have not applied for governmental assistance for fear of losing their independence, while small, financially weak NGOs have no choice but to depend on the subsidy.

Some people criticized those citizens' movements as having failed to cope with key issues that are related to macro-structural societal change and power politics, and they also argued that specialists and professional activists were the main actors in the movement, which made it difficult for them to facilitate public participation. Compared to the previous movement that aimed to bring about radical social change, the Korean citizens' movement was marked by its liberal orientation, and thus placed too much emphasis on the individual rights and civil petitioning and, eventually, failed to cope with core issues regarding law and power.

Many academics have theorized that these problems were due to the Korean citizens' movement's deep preoccupation in national macro-politics, which was the most serious problem felt by activists working in local areas.<sup>24</sup> Recently, some rightists criticized the citizens' movement groups in Seoul by calling them a new power group that is exerting a negative impact on local citizens' participation and the expansion of grassroots democracy. Leftists also criticize the citizens' movement for acting in partnership with liberal market capitalism and neoliberalism, which contributes to the exclusion of working people and deprives them of their rights.<sup>25</sup> Such criticism from both the left and right carry their own validity, and therefore remain prob-

24. This survey was conducted among 403 persons who were engaged in the citizens' movement. *Simin-ui sinmun* (NGOs Times), January 3, 2005.

25. Jeong (2000).

lems that the citizens' movement organizations need to resolve.

### *Neoliberalism and Market Fundamentalism*

Globalization, corporate restructuring, large-scale lay-offs, and aggravated economic disparities threaten the existence of the middle class. Economism, growth-oriented policy, and developmentalism are being more widely accepted as priorities, making it difficult for the citizens' movement to pursue social solidarity. Neoliberal polarization is weakening the public foundation on which the citizens' movement stands, as it has increasingly failed to offer an expectation and concrete alternatives to the middle class. As has been widely recognized, market fundamentalism<sup>26</sup> tends to eliminate the *raison d'être* behind the citizens' movement or civil society. Thus, the citizens' movement, which prioritizes the improvement of the corporate governance system, is likely to de-emphasize welfare, human rights, and the environment in favor of the theory that equates businesses competitiveness with national competitiveness. This tendency was vividly demonstrated when the National Human Rights Commission recently issued a plan calling for the improvement of human rights, including the protection of irregular workers, to which the business community responded negatively, and conservative newspapers even called for the commission's dismantlement.

An expanded civil society and a neoliberal economic order fueled the vitality of interest groups, some of which were more influential than the citizens' movement or voluntary associations. Interest groups displayed their influence most vividly when hospitals and pharmacies were planned for separation in 2000. Civic organizations were calling for this change, and the government tried to accept the

26. It refers to the idea that the free market, without state intervention, will bring both economic growth and a fair distribution of resources. Based on theories argued by Ludwig Mises, Friedrich August, and Milton Friedman, this idea can be viewed as rightist ideology, as can be seen from its attack on socialism, the welfare state, and labor unions. This idea prevailed mainly in Britain and the United States after the late 1990s.

proposal. Medical doctors' groups, however, feared this development and exerted their power to block the separation. In response, they were met with intense confrontation by the citizens' movement. Even before this time, interest groups such as the Federation of Korean Industries, the Korea Employers Federation, and the Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry made their demands via lobbying, when labor unions also emerged as an important interest group from the early 1990s. When a mass agenda, such as political democratization, prevails nationwide, interest groups tend to be influenced by these political and economic trends. However, with the decreased influence of a singular agenda, the specific agendas of interest groups that are more difficult to consolidate are brought to the fore. Having taken this into consideration, the leaders of the citizens' movement felt they could not merely be satisfied with their moral superiority and that they should present concrete policy alternatives for the issues over which many interest groups were entangled.

One of the most difficult problems currently facing Korean society may be the social instability caused by social dissolution and isolation, both factors that have been believed to stem from neoliberal economic policy. Job insecurity and concern about the future make it difficult for citizens to voluntarily participate in social issues. It cannot be denied that destruction of social solidarity is tragic, but even so, one cannot rely on the traditional community to restore solidarity. As citizens do not have a keen awareness of their social obligations as much as they eagerly want to gain political rights, it is all the more important that Korean civil society restore social trust by overcoming civic indifference and moral hazards.<sup>27</sup> Since the period of modernization, Korean people have increasingly found themselves to be socially unstable, and Korean society has become witness to the loss of a social trust system and the resultant collapse of social stability. As there has been a deep-rooted tradition of the state addressing all issues in Korea, citizens do not think they can solve social problems by themselves, and distrust of people in power runs very high. Thus,

27. Giddens (1997, 145).

more than anything else, it is important for citizens to participate in social issues with integrity and maintain social integration.

The Korean citizens' movement, in such a period of market fundamentalism, is facing the tasks of correcting market failures and maintaining moral integration in Korean society. Therefore, it is increasingly important for citizens' organizations to make efforts to curb market fundamentalism, such as through business watches, consumer campaigns, the eradication of poverty, establishment of a regional welfare system, and protection of irregular workers.

As the role of nation-states becomes limited with the advent of globalization, the question of whether the state or the market can meet human needs and desires has often been raised. Against this background, some people have taken an interest in the communitarian movement. Communitarian activists carefully present the building of new local communities as an alternative to the current situation, where there is a great disinterest in political parties, labor unions, elections, and the press, as well as a low rate of social participation. Of course, the form of community they pursue does not completely reject or ignore the state. It is within the framework of the state or even beyond it that they strive to strengthen associations and make voluntary work and contributions active. Civil social organizations' ability to create jobs at a local level and transform themselves into regional welfare agencies can offer an alternative. Also, the state, enterprises, and labor unions can jointly invest in job training, create jobs, and build the labor market for social services.

#### *A Changed Political Society*

In the 2004 General Election, the liberal Uri Party became the majority, and the progressive Democratic Labor Party gained ten parliamentary seats, which made the change of role that citizens' organizations had played on the political arena inevitable. They had an opportunity to assert their policy demands more directly than ever. However, this change paradoxically caused these groups to fall into agony.

When there was no progressive party in Korea, citizens' groups

were partially in charge of political functions, such as policy agenda development, issue-making, and legislation roles that people could not expect conservative parties to play. However, as this function was handed over to the newborn Democratic Labor Party (DLP), the citizens' movement has come to focus more on challenges such as the activation of civil society and the formation of a grassroots civil society. At this time, as seen in the case of the campaign against dispatching troops to Iraq, the question was raised of whether the progressive party and the citizens' movement could cooperate with each other regarding political issues. Tensions had previously existed between these two groups. For example, when some citizens' movement organizations tried to launch the Citizens' Alliance for the 2000 General Election, the progressive camp and even other citizens' organizations argued that it was time to mount a campaign not to defeat certain candidates, but rather to help other progressive candidates to win. This has been a consistent logic made by the labor movement and the progressive camp, which have been worried that the citizens' movement had been serving in sustaining the current liberal order. This criticism can be understood as one stating that the citizens' movement should no longer be buried under the rationale of neutrality or impartiality but rather voice its clear policy stance.

While still conceiving of itself as a social movement organization, the DLP pursued solidarity with the citizens' movement. However, the citizens' movement leaders argued that the movement needed to distance itself a certain degree from the DLP, because the DLP was an established political party and thus not free of political interests. In this context, over recent years, a new political movement proclaiming itself as being in pursuit of "green politics" has appeared. Championing grassroots democracy, this "green politics" movement has sought a way to engage in local elections.<sup>28</sup> The alliance and joint can-

28. The Chorok Jeongchi Yeondae (Korea Greens) was established in June 2004 by citizens' movement activists and local council members in the areas of environment, gender, and peace. They declared to be promoting the values of life, peace and the future, like the greens in the world. They participated in the local election of May 2006, but failed fatally because the election was overwhelmed by the issue of

didate nominations among the DLP, citizens' movement, and green politics movement are being carefully considered.

If the DLP becomes more influential and party politics are stabilized, the citizens' movement will have to reposition itself and restructure its role in society. It will likely be more difficult to establish a citizens' movement that can focus mainly on a national politics watch and policy-making.

### Conclusion

Since the economic crisis of the late 1990s, the context of the citizens' movement has undergone many changes: a shrinkage of the middle class that was facilitated by social polarization, interest groups' active engagement in decision-making regarding many political and social issues, the consequent weakened intervening power of the citizens' movement, emergence of the progressive DLP that is capable of easily politicizing the citizens' movement agenda, and the reduction of the resource pools of citizen activists due to the depoliticization of young people in their twenties. Of course, the identity confusion that the citizens' movement has undergone, stemming from the ideological diversification of the movement activists, cannot be denied either. Besides, the fact can also not be ignored that the limited potential pools of activist or so-called "crisis of reproducing citizens' movement activists" were brought about when the more notable activists began to participate in the institutionalized political arena and government. This difficulty, however, was mainly produced when centralized and state-centered issues began to disappear.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned above, the political and social impact of the citizens' movement on Korean society has shrunk, coupled with the entry of the *minjung* movement activists into the institutionalized

national politics and political fighting between the two main parties. See <http://greens.or.kr/english/>.  
29. Yoon (2005, 67).

political arena and the increased role played by interest groups.

The most significant issue that the Korean citizens' movement should resolve is that of fostering itself as an independent force distanced from the state or market. In other words, the citizens' movement should play a role as a social force that cannot be reduced to the state and market. Rather than expanding its political impact via institutionalized politics, it is most desirable for the movement to fuel societal change from within institutions by expanding its influence outside of them. The citizens' movement can be broadly political, but its independence does not refer to that of a "pure" or depoliticized movement. The citizens' movement should try to represent the voice of citizens who are against political groups or a government that caters to pro-capitalist forces. NGOs should go beyond a role of merely being independent from the state or market to one of pioneering the pursuit of an alternative order or community.

In particular, the Korean citizens' movement should overcome its Seoul-centrism and reinforce its combination of localization, specialization, and transnationality. The largest advantage that the Korean citizens' movement can have is its influence on "central politics." In the long term, however, the advantage can hamper the development of the citizens' movement since it might lack practicality. In other words, the citizens' movement will be able to maintain its vitality only when the movement combines itself with everyday politics.

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