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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

New Waves of Civic Participation and Social Movements in South Korea in the 21st Century: Organization, Configuration and Agency

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Abstract
This article describes major changes in South Korean civil society organizations, in the modes of citizens' participation and in the newly emerging generation of social movements during the first two decades of the 21st century. It focuses in particular on the long-term quantitative trends of South Korean civil society organisations and the participation rates; changes in the macrosocial configuration of the field of civil society including the tendency of differentiation, decentralisation and ideological polarisation; as well as on recent trends in the culture of protest and a new generation of social movements, for example the precarious youth's movements, new feminist generations, and climate action.

1. Introduction

After democratization in 1987, it became possible for South Koreans to address and deal with many social problems and collective conflicts through newly institutionalised processes of political expression, coordination and decision-making. However, to achieve a better quality of democracy that goes beyond electoral competition and majority rule, civic participation and civil society activities for the common good are as important as the role of political parties, professional politicians and policy experts. Above all, autonomous associations enable citizens to consult with each other, engage in public issues and influence public policy.[1]

In this regard, South Korean society has recently shown several remarkable trends. Large-scale peaceful demonstrations, so-called candlelight protests or candlelight vigils, have occurred several times since the early 2000s, affecting big issues concerning government policies, foreign relations, and abuse of political power. In particular, the candlelight vigils that lasted for six months during 2016 and 2017 and the subsequent impeachment of President Park Geun-Hye following proper constitutional procedure showed how much power citizens' politics can exert over representative politics. Indeed, it showed how mature the citizens' capacity of exerting their power in today's South Korea has really become.

From the perspective of international comparison, it is also noteworthy that South Koreans' political activism and civil society activities of various sorts

1. Taylor, Charles. 1990. "Modes of Civil Society." In: *Public Culture* 3 (1), 95–118.

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have increased considerably in the decades after democratization. Looking at the trends of the results of the World Values Survey, the proportion of citizens joining civil society organizations has steadily declined in many Western countries since the 2000s, whereas in South Korea, the participantion rates have increased in many sectors, narrowing the gap with Western countries with a long tradition of democracy. According to the most recent Wave 7 (2017 – 2020) of the World Values Survey, South Koreans are not only highly engaged in political and social activism, but also civic participation in organizing online political activities, events and protests was higher than any other country in the world.[2]

To obtain a more systematic picture of the changes that have occurred in South Korean civil society and social movements after democratization and especially during the first decades of the twenty-first century, subsequent sections will proceed as follows: section 2 discusses the long-term quantitative trends of South Korean civil society organizations and participation while section 3 analyses the changes that have occurred in the macro-social configuration of the field of civil society. Section 4 discusses recent trends in protest cultures and the newly generation of social movements with a particular focus on young precarious workers' movements, feminist campaigns, and climate action. In the concluding remarks of section 5, I will describe the potential as well as the weaknesses of these recent changes in South Korean civil society and social movements.

The overall argument of this article is that while the number of organizations and participants of civil society in South Korea have increased rapidly and the structure of civil society at a macro level has become more pluralistic and decentralized, political and social activism of citizens is becoming increasingly common; and most recently, new waves of social movements by young people on issues including labor, inequality, feminism, and the climate crisis are creating new dynamics in South Korean society and politics. In such characteristics, we find distinctive strengths and weaknesses that set contemporary South Korean society apart from those democratic societies with long-standing civic traditions that operate stably according to well-established rules and institutions.

2. The Accelerating Expansion of Civil Society

In the years following South Korea's transition to democracy in 1987, the most important question about South Korea's civil society was whether the former pro-democracy movements would be able to gain participation and political support from a wide enough range of citizens in order to play a key role in the process of democratic consolidation and institutional reform. In this respect, the implications of the developments in South Korea proved to be ambivalent. On the one hand, heightened competition and anxiety among atomized individuals who went *bowling alone*[3] have increased the power of capital and accelerated market growth in a progressively liberal institutional environment. On the other hand, an increasing number of citizens joined the associational life of the new political landscape, thereby engaging in the creation of new 'civic traditions' in order to make Korean democracy work.[4]

In the decade from the late 1980s to the late 1990s, several important nationwide civil society organizations were founded which continue to play a significant role in South Korean politics and society. Some of the most well-known organizations such as the *Korea Women's Associations United* (1987), *Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice* (1989), *Korean Teachers and Educational Workers' Union* (1989), *Korea Federation for Environmental Movements* (1993),

2. Shin, Jin-Wook. 2021. "Social Movements: Developments and Structural Changes after Democratisation." In: Youngho Cho, JeongHun Han and Ramon Pacheco Pardo (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of South Korean Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

3. Putnam Robert. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

4. Putnam, Robert. 1993. *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Sarangbang Group for Human Rights (1993), *People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy* (1994), and *Korean Confederation of Trade Unions* (1995), to mention just a few, were all established during this period.

These civil society organizations and their associated expert groups like researchers, lawyers and journalists made significant contributions to the post-democratization reform process. When democracy was first introduced after decades of dictatorship, government officials, political parties and politicians lacked both the will and the capacity to perceive social problems, develop policy solutions and communicate with citizens. Civil society groups, on the contrary, were better prepared than institutional political elites and actors since they had a history of elaborating values, creating discourses and institutional visions for the future society during the time of democratization movements. During this transitional situation, civil society organizations often took on the character of political 'quasi-parties' and even assumed the function of political representation.[5]

However, with the maturation of democratic politics, the government and political parties have gradually increased the capacity of legislation and policy development. Such changes have occurred in a variety of ways, including expanding networks with academia and external experts, developing government-funded research institutions and increasing the political parties' own professional capacities. Politicians often took up the discourses, agendas and policy ideas that civil society organizations had been shaping for a long time, and conversely, many of the civil society leaders and activists moved into politics as members of the central as well as local governments, parliaments and governance bodies.

Some interpret these changes to signify a decline of South Korean civil society and even the political 'engulfing' of civil society.[6] Such views may be relevant in some respects, but greatly misunderstand the overall trend of change during the 21st century. Though it seems correct that, unlike during the period immediately after democratization, civil society organizations in South Korea now do not have a clear advantage over the government political parties in terms of agenda setting, initiating institutional change, and introducing policy alternatives, it is, however, important to note that the quantitative and qualitative development of civil society has been rapidly progressing in the same period in which the capacity of political actors has been strengthened. In other words, in South Korea in the 21st century, state and civil society have co-developed, and during that process civil society actors have certainly lost their prior influence in some repects but have become much more powerful in many others.

First, although the major civic groups established in the decade after democratization have now weakened their direct political influence compared to the 1990s and the early 2000s, it would be mistaken to conclude that the capacity of civil society organizations to intervene in the government's policy decision and party politics has similarly been reduced. Organizations established in the late 1980s and the 1990s either continued their specialized activities after the 2000s (political monitoring, economic justice), or expanded into activities characterized by a local base (environment), or diverged into more specified issue areas (human rights), or cooperated with new generations of movement constituents as in the case of feminism. More importantly, the assessment that South Korea's civil society has weakened since the 2000s reflects ignorance of new and increasingly expansive areas of South Korean civil society beyond the large-scale organizations that were particularly influential in the 1990s.

5. Cho, Hee-Yeon. 2000. "Democratic Transition and Changes in Korean NGOs." In: *Korea Journal* 40(2), 275–304.

6. Choi, Jang-Jip. 2020. "The Democratic State Engulfing Civil Society: The Ironies of Korean Democracy." In: *Korean Studies* 34, 1–24.

Numerous organizations for the public interest, non-profit organizations, social movement groups, cooperatives, social enterprises, and residents' communities have been newly created since the 2000s. In South Korea in the 21st century, the size and density of civil society grew much more extensively than in the 1990s, when a limited number of organizations that succeeded the democratization movements enjoyed a dominant status within the still underdeveloped field of civil society. In other words, the quantitative expansion of South Korean civil society after democratization accelerated as time passed.

Looking at statistical indicators, the total number of newly established civil society organizations per year started to increase in the 1990s immediately after democratization, but more dramatically so in the 2000s and the 2010s. The number of civil society organizations established in the 1980s was only 538 in total. It more than tripled to 1,662 in the 1990s reaching as many as 5,902 in the 2000s.[7] In the 2010s, this number of civil society organizations increased even more steeply. In the case of non-profit civic organizations, based on statistics from the *Ministry of Public Administration and Security*, the number of registered organizations rose from 10,889 in 2012 to 14,699 in 2019. The number of public corporations reached 34,843 in 2018, while the number of the registered and approved cooperatives in 2020 was 19,263, and the number of the certified social enterprises was 2,704. There are now tens of thousands of national or local organizations active throughout South Korean civil society.

Another trend that should be emphasized in addition to this quantitative in-crease is the fact that, unlike the citizens' movements in the 1990s that were centralized in some nationwide organizations, the number of locally based ci-vil society organizations increased significantly after the 2000s. Among the entire registered non-profit civic organizations in 2019, 1,685 were registered in central administrative institutions, while 13,014 were registered in local ad-ministrative institutions. Throughout the 2010s, the number of organizations registered in central institutions remained stagnant, whereas the number of local-level organizations increased steadily leading to the continuous growth of all non-profit civic organizations. Along with these changes, collaborative relationships between local governments and community movements have also been developed.[8]

As such, the accelerated quantitative expansion of South Korean civil society in the 21st century is clearly recognizable in the official statistics. However, another interesting fact concerns the changing nature of citizens' activism. Citizens, especially so the younger generations of civil society activists, are increasingly unwilling to establish formal organizations. Rather than looking to expand the size of formalized organizations, they organize by joint actions for change in informal and small-scale communities and social networks which are connected through online spaces or Social Network Services (SNS). In many social movement campaigns that have occurred since the 2000s, the spread of information and the communication through such informal social networks, online communities and social media platforms played a decisive role. I will come back to these new types of activities in more detail in section 4.

3. The Changing Configuration of South Korean Civil Society

The changes in civic engagement described in the previous sections do, therefore, not only concern the rapidly increasing number of participants in civic activities since the 2000s but have also affected the macro-social configuration of the civil society field as such. To think of civil society as a collective actor

7. Shin, Jin-Wook. 2021. "Social Movements: Developments and Structural Changes after Democratisation." In: Youngho Cho, JeongHun Han and Ramon Pacheco Pardo (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of South Korean Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming.

8. Kim, Sangmin. 2017. "From Protest to Collaboration: The Evolution of the Community Movements amid Sociopolitical Transformation in South Korea." In: *Urban Studies* 54(16), 3806–3825.

or a homogeneous social area would constitute a fatal misunderstanding of the reality and idea of civil society. Michael Walzer and others have emphasized that civil society should not be understood as an association or a project, but as "a network of free associations"[9] or a "sphere concept".[10] Numerous local, specific, and contingent fragments are active in the spheres of civil society, and the totality of multi-dimensional relations of solidarity and conflicts between them constitutes the macro-level configuration or geometry[11] of civil society. So, while respecting the various local fragments, which are normally the actual units of collective action, we must also understand what broader relational structures they are located in.

In this respect, South Korean civil society has undergone several significant structural transformations since 1987. The first consists in that the civil society groups that succeeded the pre-democratization movements expanded into diverse sectors of activity and, thus, were differentiating along their respective values, issues and participant groups. First of all, social movements in issue areas including labor, peasant, and urban poor, which were called *Minjung* movements, continued their efforts to strengthen their organizational foundation, while on the other hand, new social movements called *Shimin* movements rapidly grew in size and influence. The latter include movement groups in various fields such as political reform, economic justice, gender, environment, peace, education, and human rights. The differentiation phase of the Minjung and Shimin movements took place most intensively from the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s.

The second change is that civil society has increasingly become polarized along a progressive/conservative dichotomy. Autonomous civil society or social movements in South Korea have long been considered to be characterized by progressive ideologies such as equality, inclusion, social justice, greater welfare, anti-discrimination, inter-Korean reconciliation and cooperation, and cosmopolitanism. However, as the institutions and cultures of South Korean society gradually embraced such progressive elements, counter-movements advocating conservative values emerged and spread rapidly. Accordingly, the understanding of civil society also transformed from being recognized as a search for the common good (independent of political and ideological partisanship) to being perceived as a form of social forces linked to particular political and ideological camps. These changes began to take effect between 2004 to 2005, during the mid-years of the Roh Moo-Hyun administration, when the so-called New Right networks and various conservative groups were formed and became increasingly active. In recent years, political divisions in South Korean society have deepened due to the long-term protests by conservative citizens who still refuse to accept the impeachment of the former President Park Geun-hye in March 2017.[12]

A third aspect concerns the configuration of civil society actors, which has been decentralized with the expansion of social communities, networks and social movement participants independent of political parties or large-scale civic organizations. A dramatic example of such decentralization is the so-called *candlelight demonstrations* (*ch'ŏtbul chiphoe*), a spontaneous and non-organized form of protest action that has the characteristics of networked social movements.[13] Although the subversion of the leading role of formal organizations had already begun to appear at the 2002 candlelight vigil in commemoration of Miseon and Hyosun, two teenagers who were killed in an accident with a US military vehicle, the decisive watershed was the so-called *beef protests* or *million citizen protests* in 2008, which was a large-scale protest against the lifting

9. The classic reference is Walzer, Michael. 1991. "The Idea of Civil Society: A Path to Social Reconstruction." In: *Dissent* 39: 293–304. For the direct quote see Walzer, Michael. 1992. "The Civil Society Argument," In Chantal Mouffe (ed.), *Dimensions of Radical Democracy: Pluralism, Citizenship, Community* (London: Verso, 1992), 102.

10. Jensen, Mark N. 2006. "Concepts and conceptions of civil society." In: *Journal of Civil Society* 2(1), 39–56.

11. Edwards, Michael. 2011. "Introduction: Civil Society and the Geometry of Human Relations." In: Michael Edwards (ed.). *The Oxford Handbook of Civil Society*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 3–14.

12. Cho, Sarah, and Juheon Lee. 2021. "Waving Israeli Flags at Right-Wing Christian Rallies in South Korea." In: *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 51(3), 496–515; Yang, Myungji. 2020. "Defending "Liberal Democracy"? Why Older South Koreans Took to the Streets against the 2016-17 Candlelight Protests." In: *Mobilization* 25 (3), 365–382.

13. Castells, Manuel. 2012. *Networks of Outrage and Hope: Social Movements in the Internet Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

of Korean import bans on US beef that had been in effect since a 2003 outbreak of bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) – so-called mad cow disease – in the US.[14] The protests were also directed against the Lee Myung-bak administration's neoliberal trade policy, in particular the negotiations on a Korea-US free trade agreement held at that time. However, a tendency toward decentralization is also found in everyday practices of civil society organizations. Many of the new organizations and local voluntary associations of the 21st century described in the preceding section are not part of formal large-scale organizations but rooted in their local spaces. In addition, this new generation of social movements, which will be described in the next section, are pursuing horizontal cooperation rather than hierarchical relationships with existing formal organizations.

The three types of structural transformations described above should not be understood as consecutive stages, but as multi-dimensional processes that coexist in one and the same social and temporal space. In other words, it is not that differentiation occurred first which was then followed by polarization, and finally by decentralization. Rather, today's civil society actors are located in a differentiated, decentralized, fragmentary and politically and ideologically polarized macro-social field. Because all of these three structural dimensions are intertwined, it cannot be easily determined which is most important to South Korean society and politics at any given time, nor which one will be decisive in the future. However, by considering these processes of differentiation, polarization, and decentralization in South Korean civil society together, we will be able to better understand the macro-social context and environment within which individual entities and groups are formed and events are taking place. Table 1 summarizes the structural transformation of South Korean civil society as described above.[15]

Structural Changes	Period	Major Features	Important Events	Political Implications
Differentiation	1987~	Diversification of ideology, agendas, and organizational networks of civil society movements; tendency of professionalization and institutionalization of each movement group	Differentiation of the class-based movements and the 'citizens' movements' in the late 1980s; differentiation of movement sectors and organizations within the citizens' movements from the first half of the 1990s	Institutional and social recognition of civil society movements; cooperation and conflict between civil society actors on the one side, and the government, political parties, and media on the other side
Polarization	2004~	Intensification of the ideological and political cleavages within civil society corresponding to the antagonism between the conservatives and the liberal-progressives in the sphere of institutional politics	Reform alliance between the liberal government and the progressive civil society, 1998-2007; rapid growth of old and new right-wing groups from 2004 to 2007	Emergence of a partisan link between party politics and civil society; the increase of the political influence of civil society in contrast to the decrease of social trust in politicized civil society organizations
Decentralization	2008~	Emergence and rapid growth of independent networks and political participation by citizens who do not identify themselves with particular camps in institutional politics and organized civil society	The 2008 anti-Lee Myung-Bak candlelight protests as a watershed; candlelight protests for the impeachment of Park Geun-Hye in 2016-17; but also the conservative taegŭkki demonstrations from 2017 to the present	Growing influence of the citizens' large-scale and direct action and related changes in public opinion upon the behaviors of the institutional centers in party politics, state organs, and mass media

Table 1: Structural transformation of South Korean civil society after democratization

4. New Generation of Protest Culture and Social Movements

While we have focused on the organizational expansion and macro-social configuration of civil society so far, this section will look at recent trends in the

14. Before the ban took effect, South Korea was the third-largest importer of US beef and even became the largest export market for US beef after the lifting of import restrictions. Korean Times. 2008. "S. Korea Becomes Largest Market for US Beef." November 19, 2008, https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/tech/2021/07/693_34658.html.

15. Cf. Shin, Jin-Wook. 2020b. "Winding Paths of Democratization and the Transformation of Citizen Politics in South Korea, 1987-2017." In: Hannes Mosler (ed.). *South Korea's Democracy Challenge. Political System, Political Economy, and Political Society*, Berlin et al.: Peter Lang, 172.

collective protest action of citizens and newly emerging social movements. It is of special significance in this respect whether there are recognizable changes corresponding with the three trends (quantitative growth, localisation and diversification, decentralisation) described above.

In the late 1980s, Ulrich Beck predicted that 'generalized political activism' of citizens was going on in many democratic societies, and that such changes would change the grammar of institutional politics.[16] Claus Offe, on the other hand, observed that a "new paradigm of politics"[17] emerged after social protests on various issues such as women, culture, peace and environment occurred on a global scale during the mid- and late 1960s and were institutionalized in the form of social movement organizations and new political parties. Social movement researchers have conceptualized these trends throughout the Western world as the advent of a "social movement society" by referring to the tendency of citizens' social movement activities and political activism to become more common and indeed ubiquitous.[18]

Social movement society can be approached from various perspectives, such as regarding the frequency of protest actions and social movement campaigns, the average number of participants, social recognition of social movement activities as a legitimate way of expression of opinions, and the spread of cooperative relations between institutional sectors and social movement constituents. It should however be noted, that we cannot presuppose that a particular society will change in the same direction in all of these indicators. For example, it is possible that the frequency of demonstration increases but the participation rate of civil society organizations decreases; or, that while the frequency of large-scale assemblies increases, the average number of participants in assemblies decreases. Therefore, to effectively capture such complexity, we need to reconstruct the overall trend by synthetically considering the results of analysis for each indicator.[19]

First, in terms of the frequency of collective actions, the annual number of assemblies and demonstrations does not show a linear trend of increase or decrease after democratization, according to the statistics from the *National Police Agency*. Excluding the exceptional increase of the frequency of protest in 1999-2002, right after the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the annual frequency of assemblies and demonstrations from the early 1990s to the late 2010s has remained constant at around 10,000. The annual number of participants in assemblies and demonstrations also shows no long-term increase or decrease but moves in a waveform, according to the annual survey on social integration conducted by the *Korea Institute of Public Administration*.

The most impressive change during the thirty years since democratization is not so much the frequency or number of participants of the protests as the fact that the number of illegal and violent protests has declined sharply and consistently. In the mid-1990s, the number of illegal and violent assemblies and demonstrations exceeded 800 a year, but in the 2000s, the number fell to double digits, and continued to decline. Surprisingly, even in 2017, when millions of people participated in the candlelight vigils calling for the impeachment of the then-President Park Geun-hye, and in 2018, when the anti-impeachment counter-movements held massive demonstrations at every weekend, there were only 12 cases of illegal and violent cases per year, according to the police statistics. Despite the intensifying antagonism in South Korean politics, the respect of law and the principle of non-violence seem to have been established as a dominant culture of protest. This trend is inseparable from the changes in the

16. Beck, Ulrich. 1986. *Risikogesellschaft. Auf dem Weg in eine andere Moderne.* Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 317–319.

17. Offe, Claus, 1985, "New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of Institutional Politics". In: *Social Research* 52(4), 828–832.

18. Meyer, David S., and Sidney Tarrow (ed.). 1998. *The Social Movement Society: Contentious Politics for a New Century*. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield.

19. Cf. Soule, Sarah A., and Jennifer Earl. 2005. "A Movement Society Evaluated: Collective Protest in the United States, 1960-1986." In: *Mobilization* 10(3), 345–364.

policing strategies of public authorities to guarantee the legal assemblies as much as possible.

Another striking trend is the fact that mass media coverage of protests has been steadily increasing since 2008. According to the results of analysis of the annual number of articles containing 'assembly' or 'demonstration' in 18 major South Korean daily and economic newspapers using *BigKinds*, a newspaper search program of the *Korean Press Foundation*,[20] the annual number of articles from 1990 to 2007 remained largely constant at around 10,000 but surged to 24,618 in 2008, and continued to increase, reaching 45,446 in 2020.[21] As the actual frequency of assemblies and demonstrations has remained relatively constant over the past 30 years and has risen only exceptionally in 1999-2002 according to the official statistics of the Korean National Police Agency, it seems more reasonable to interpret the trends of media coverage as indicating increased attention to the citizens' protest actions rather than reflection of the reality. In the modern media society, any kind of collective action cannot be known to the public and cannot have political and social influence without media attention. In this respect, the recent trend in South Korean media suggests that the visibility and the potential impact of civic activism has substantially grown.

Concerning the nature of civil society activism, one of the most notable features of recent South Korean social movements is the rapid growth of a new generation of activists and social movements. These new streams of social movements that have been growing since the early 2010s include various types of non-regular workers' movements, youth movements dealing with the issue of labor, debt and housing, a new generation of feminist movements, and the climate action attracting more and more participants from the youth. In all of these fields, a new generation of activists independent of the direct successors of the prior democratization movements already emerged from the early 2000s, but an explosion in the new participants, networks, organizations and socio-political attention have occurred since 2010 (in the case of the youth precarious workers movement) and 2015 (feminist movements) respectively, while, since 2018, climate change activism has entered the public arena.

The youth labor movements that took the lead in these new waves of social movements may be interpreted as the young generation's response to the deepening socioeconomic inequality and precariousness in South Korea after the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Their movements began around 2009/2010 and continued to focus on the precarious employment situation of young workers, as well as other social issues including housing, rising debt and poverty. Organizations that represent this trend include *Youth Union* (labor), *Slug Union* (housing), *Welfare State Youth Network* (welfare) and *Youth Solidarity Bank Todak* (debt).

These movements played a decisive role for the introduction of innovative youth policies through close cooperation with the Seoul Metropolitan Government, and their experience of such cooperative governance soon spread to many other regions. After the Moon Jae-in government took office in 2017, the central government accepted a large part of the demands of these movements, and made considerable institutional progress, such as the enactment of the *Basic Act for Young People* and the establishment of the *Office for Youth Policy Coordination* in 2020.[22]

The feminist movements that spread widely in the 2010s result from a new generation of feminist activism led by young women called in Korean *Young-Young Femi*, *New Femi*, or *Net Femi*. These movements place great importance on issues such as sexual violence, control over women's body, culture of

20. https://www.bigkinds.or.kr/

21. Shin, Jin-Wook. 2020c. "Participatory Democracy." In: Institute for Korean Democracy (ed.). *Korean Democracy. Annual Report 2020*. Korea Democracy Foundation, 91.

22. Yang, Kyunguk, and Yeon Joo Chae. 2020. "Organizing the young precariat in South Korea: A case study of the Youth Community Union." In: *Journal of Industrial Relations* 62(1), 58–80.

misogyny, political correctness, the politics of identity, and systems of sexual domination in everyday life.[23] To roughly classify the changes of the women's or feminist movement in South Korea, the first-generation women's movement from the 1980s to the 1990s positioned itself as a part of the democratization movements and the broader movements for social reform and placed great importance on institutional reform to resolve gender inequality. The second-generation feminist movements from the early 1990s to the early 2000s was led by younger generations of women called *young feminists* at that time, marking issues of the politics of sexuality, anti-sexual violence campaigns, and the patriarchal cultures within progressive movements.

The third-generation feminist movements of the young-young feminists started with the hashtag movement *#I am a feminist* in 2015, which was soon followed by a period of dramatic upsurge in new feminist movements called *feminism reboot*.[24] Events that brought about great social and political repercussions such as the *Gangnam Station Post-it Note protest* in 2016, the *Hyehwa Station protest* in 2018 and various #MeToo #WithYou campaigns have followed since.[25] In addition, many movements targeting the micro-power of the patriarchal order are currently underway, such as the *Tal-Corset* (taking off all corsets) movement, the short hair campaign, and the *4B* (非) movement (no dating, no sex, no marriage, no childbirth).

Issue-based politics concerning climate change and environmentalism are also rapidly gaining ground in the field of social movements as well as in many other fields of South Korean society including the government, academia and the media. Beyond environmental movements, there are also feminist activists, labor movements, trade unions and a large spectrum of other civic groups that are committed to sustainable development goals and are increasingly active in this issue area. Since the 1990s, environmental movements in South Korea have consistently raised problems such as ecological threats, global warming and climate change. International events such as the *Rio Earth Summit* in 1992, the *UN Framework Convention on Climate Change* in 1994, and the *Kyoto Protocol* on climate change in 1997 have had a huge impact on the environmental and ecological discussions in Korea. In addition to the organizations established in the 1990s, for example *Green Korea* and the *Korea Federation for Environmental Movements*, many other movement groups such as the *Energy Justice Action* and the *Korea NGO's Energy Network* established in the 2000s have been committed to the issue of climate, energy and environment.

However, qualitatively different changes seem to be taking place since the late 2010s. Most importantly, not only environmental activists but also civil society groups from a wide variety of sectors are joining discussions and action concerning climate issues. International events that have influenced this mood include the *Paris Climate Agreement* and the *UN Sustainable Development Goals* resolution in 2015, but above all the *Fridays for Future* campaign, which is a global climate strike movement that started in 2018 inspired by the protest action by Swedish teenager Greta Thunberg. In the years since 2018, a lot of new climate action groups, mostly by the youth, have been established in South Korea, including the *Youth 4 Climate Action*, the *Youth Climate Emergency Action*, *Extinction Rebellion Korea*, and *Energy Transition Korea*. In this context, South Korean President Moon Jae-in declared carbon neutrality until 2050 and established the '2050 Carbon Neutrality Committee' affiliated with the president in 2020.

23. Socio-economic inequality and gender division of labour markets have, of course, been long-standing themes of the women's movements. However, as such they cannot be seen as a specific focus of new feminisms in the 2010s.

24. Sohn, Hee-Jeong. 2015. "Feminism reboot." In: *Munhwagwahak* 83, 14–47.

25. Kim, Jinsook. 2017. "#iamafeminist as the "mother tag": feminist identification and activism against misogyny on Twitter in South Korea." In: *Feminist Media Studies* 17(5), 804–820; Yun, Ji-Yeong. 2020. "Feminist Net-Activism as a New Type of Actor-Network that Creates Feminist Citizenship." In: *Asian Women* 36(4):,45–65.

The participants of the new social movements as described above often move from one issue to another, and they form intersectional identities with multiple memberships in the movement groups of several issues. Participants in the youth labor movements for non-regular workers, for example, later joined the movements for 'just transition,' linking social justice and ecological values. Activists of feminist groups may join the climate action simultaneously, serving as a bridge between the two issue areas. In that sense, the young activists are not only personally and organizationally connected within multi-organizational fields, but also form a 'social movement family' of citizens who share social values for change.[26]

In terms of the movement culture, too, the new generation of activists and participants show some common characteristics. They emphasize the importance of the voices and experience of the persons directly concerned, movement participation based on self-motivation, horizontal and open communication structures, rejection of bureaucratic efficiency and elitism, and independence from large-scale formal organizations and established political forces. It remains to be seen how significant the changes will turn out to be that they will be able to bring to South Korean politics and social movements in the future.

5. Conclusion

One of the most characteristic features of modern politics and culture on the Korean peninsula and in South Korea throughout the twentieth century was the vitality and unending dynamism of civil society. Korea, and later South Korea, was ruled by imperialist and authoritarian rulers for nearly 80 years during the 20th century, but since the *March First Movement* in 1919, autonomous civil society has been a driving force of an uninterrupted contentious politics. After democratization, civil society forces that succeeded the tradition of earlier democratization movements established many civil society organizations to improve institutions, cultures and practices in all spheres of society. As such, they made a significant contribution to the reform process in the 1990s.[27]

During the first two decades of the twenty-first century which formed the main focus of this article, significant growth and structural changes in civil society, social movements and contentious politics in South Korea have occurred in markedly different form than in the decades following democratization from the late 1980s to the 1990s. Those recent changes have both positive potentials and unignorable weaknesses for the future of South Korean civil society and democracy.

The number of civil society organizations has grown immensely and there are now far more local organizations than in the past. The number of citizens participating in civil society activities continued to increase and has now reached a level that does not lag behind those of Western countries with a long history of democracy. In an environment in which the democratic government respects the political rights of citizens, citizens have established a culture of peaceful expression of opinions. Mass media outlets are increasingly interested in and reporting on collective actions by which citizens publicly convey their grievances and demands. The macro-social structure of civil society has become more diversified than in the past, and a new generation of social movements is rapidly establishing itself and growing in significance.

However, many activists of South Korean civil society in the 21st century feel a great lack of ability to actually change politics, even though they are dissatisfied with public policies, politicians and political parties. Numerous small

26. della Porta, Donatella, and Dieter Rucht. 1995. "Left-libertarian movements in context: a comparison of Italy and West Germany, 1965–1990." In J. Craig Jenkins and Bert Klandermans (ed.). *The Politics of Social Protest. Comparative Perspectives on States and Social Movements*. London: UCL Press, 229–297.

27. Shin, Jin-Wook. 2020a. "Changing Patterns of South Korean Social Movements, 1960s-2010s: Testimony, Firebombs, Lawsuit, and Candlelight." In: David Chiavacci, Simona Grano, and Julia Obinger (ed.). *Civil Society and the State in Democratic East Asia: Between Entanglement and Contention in Post High Growth*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 239–368.

communities and networks dispersed into local spaces often make it difficult to prevent or correct the problems at the national stage of power struggles. Civil society actors now have better opportunities for cooperative governance with governments or municipalities than in the past, but they also run the risk of dependence on public finances and infrastructure, loss of political independence and the bureaucratization of civil society. In addition, while the overall number of civil society organizations has steeply increased, the serious weakness of workers' organizational power has taken a turn in the opposite direction. Furthermore, the localization tendency of civil society activities also reveals the problem of uneven development between regions.

Which of these two-sided potentials inherent in the current South Korean civil society will become the dominant trend in the future will be conditioned by the given objective structures, but it will also strongly depend on the societal relevance and the respective diagnoses, strategies and solidarity of individual civil society actors. Perhaps the biggest obstacle for the future contribution of civil society to the advancement of South Korean society is the inconsistency between the centralized and rigid structure of power under the presidential system and majoritarian electoral system, on the one hand, and the increasingly diversified and dynamic spheres of civil society, on the other. Although civil society actors' dissatisfaction with institutional politics that do not reflect changing social needs is likely to increase in coming years, it will not be easy for any new political party or political movement to gather momentum in South Korea. Instead, the diverse forces of civil society, from ecologists to feminists, will constitute a constant challenge for both, governments and political parties in their ever more vocal demand for change.

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