

Grassroots Influences on the U.S.-ROK Alliance: The Role of Civil Society

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Knowledge-Net for a Better World

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I. Introduction

If one takes a long-term historical perspective on U.S.-ROK (Republic of Korea) relations, she can plausibly argue that civil society leaders have built and led bilateral relations between U.S. and ROK. On the South Korean side, it is hard to imagine how South Korean society would look like without the churches and schools that American missionaries have built in Korea since the 19th century. Among South Koreans, American-educated Koreans such as Yu Kil-chun, Seo Jae-pil, and Rhee Syngman, have led the modernization of Korean society since the late 19th century. Even now, tens of thousands South Korean students each year go to the United States for education and an equally large number of them return to South Korea after their American education. On the American side, Korean Americans, Korean War veterans and church and business leaders form the core of domestic support for strong U.S.-Korean relations.

For the last decade, however, the role of civil society in South Korea has changed. By and large, the common image of the South Korean civil society has become the hotbed of anti-Americanism. Although South Korean non-governmental organizations (NGOS) have always tussled with the United States Forces Korea (USFK) over issues related to the U.S. military bases in South Korea such as the behavior of American soldiers and the relocation of U.S. bases, it was only in the 2000s when South Korean civil society power and activism began to be viewed as a serious threat to the very existence of the U.S.-ROK security alliance.

In 2002, massive demonstrations erupted in Seoul following the accident in which two South Korean middle school girls were killed by an American military vehicle. Many analysts argue that the wave of anti-Americanism triggered by the accident played a signifi-



cant role in the surprise victory of a left-wing candidate, Roh Moo-hyun, in the 2002 presidential election. After 2002, civil society groups led two other major anti-American demonstrations, the protest over the U.S.-ROK Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) in 2006-2007 (Choi, 2011) and the candle-light demonstrations against the importation of American beef in 2008 (Go and Hahm, 2010; Heo, 2011). Civil society groups have also been critical of U.S. policy toward the Korean peninsula, especially, its North Korea policy, which they view as overly coercive and hostile.

Given this contradictory condition in South Korean civil society, we need to use different approaches to different civil society groups in thinking about how civil society groups can contribute to a stronger U.S.-ROK relationship. In theory, South Korean civil society groups can help strengthen the U.S.-ROK alliance in two ways (Snyder, 2008). First, they can make the U.S.-ROK alliance healthy and popular by holding leaders of both countries accountable in their alliance policies. Second, South Korean civil societies can expand the social foundation of the alliance by forming coalitions and increasing interactions with civil society groups in the United States. But I argue in this paper that for reasons both historical and political, neither represents a promising prospect. Instead, both South Korean and American leaders should work together to respond effectively to the negative influence of liberal or leftist civil society groups on U.S.-ROK relations.

II. Who are the civil society groups to study?

Before discussing the role of civil society in the U.S.-ROK alliance, it is important to define what we mean by civil society in this paper. The broadest definition of civil society refers to the collection of interests and actors organized for collection action purposes around shared interests, purposes and values. Civil society groups thus defined should include a whole range of organizations that do not belong wholly to government, market or family such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, business associations, and advocacy groups. Civil society is also to be distinguished from the nonprofit sector, a larger category that includes not only civil society groups but also nonprofit health care, education and culture organizations. As Table 1 shows, civil society groups are relatively small



among nonprofit groups; in terms of expenditure, they represent only 2.5 percent of the nonprofit sector in South Korea.

Table 1 Expenditure for Nonprofit Organizations in South Korea (1997)

ICNPO Classification*	Total Expenditure (billion won)	Composition Ratio (%)
Culture and recreation	374	1.7
Education and research	9,780	44.5
Health care	4,978	22.6
Social services	1,057	4.8
Citizen groups	550	2.5
Religion	4,180	19.0
Business and professional associations, unions	1,079	4.9
Total	22,003	100.0

Source: International Classification of Nonprofit Organizations.

Source: Hwang and Kang (2002).

Looking at the list of civil society groups, it is straightforward to see that it is not necessary to study the entire civil society because most of the civil society groups are not active on political issues, let alone the U.S.-ROK relations. For analytical tractability, I focus on citizen (activist or advocacy) groups in this paper. ROK veterans groups, who have played an important role in supporting the U.S.-ROK military alliance, are excluded because they are not sufficiently independent of the government and their role is predictable and not analytically interesting. Church groups are certainly more interesting than veterans groups at least for two reasons.¹ First, one can argue that church groups, who are the symbol of cultural affinity between the United States and South Korea, should do more to expand the coverage of the bilateral alliance to values and norms. Second, at the same time, South Korean church groups are divided between conservative and progressive factions, making them difficult to take a unified stance on sensitive U.S.-ROK bilateral issues. Given their rich history and potential importance, church groups deserve a separate study and are not covered in this paper.

Even if we narrow the scope of the study to citizen groups, the boundary problem still remains, since there are many different types of citizen groups. Citizen groups, commonly called activist groups in the United States, are citizen-based groups organized to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change. Their action is often in



support of, or opposition to, one side of a controversial social issue. Prominent American activist groups such as Common Cause and the Environmental Defense Fund are active as advocates of consumer protection, environmental protection, and human and labor rights.

Among South Korean citizen groups, social reform groups such as the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ) and People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD) should be included in any study of South Korean civil society because they are the most influential citizen groups in South Korea. Social reform groups work in the area of economic and social justice by promoting economic and political reforms to strengthen transparency and accountability in corporate and financial sectors. The second group of citizen groups to analyze in this paper is what I call social movement or dissident groups, radical groups who refuse to join the mainstream civil society by continuing to reject the legitimacy of the South Korean state. Social movement groups have actively participated in a series of anti-American demonstrations in the 2000s, starting with the 2002 demonstrations against the U.S. troops in South Korea over the traffic death of two young South Korean girls and continuing to the anti-KORUS-FTA movement in 2005-2007 and the anti-U.S.-beef demonstrations in 2008.

III. Historical review and current status of South Korean citizen groups

South Korean citizen groups are powerful actors in South Korean politics. Many say that South Korea has the strongest and most dynamic civil society in East Asia thanks in large part to its citizen groups (Flake, 2008). Why are citizen groups exceptionally influential in South Korea? I would say that much of it has to do with history.

Citizen groups in South Korea are the direct descendents of the social movement of the authoritarian era (1961-1987) (Kim, 2002). Despite increasingly harsh state repression, the South Korean social movement developed a rich tradition of contentious politics under authoritarianism. In 1975 alone, there were more than 300 protests led by students, unions, churches or dissidents which was almost one every day. When public protests were heavily repressed, the social movement went underground and this underground culture of contentious politics developed thoroughly not only in political ideology but in fields as diverse as activist literature, activist art, activist music and dance, and activist theology.



The strength of the social movement became manifested any time the state relaxed its repressive policies. For example, after Park Chung Hee was assassinated, many groups became visible again in what is called the Spring of 1980, and also many protests occurred starting in 1984 when Chun Doo Hwan liberalized its repressive policies. The summer of 1987, when millions hit the streets demanding direct presidential elections, can be seen as the culmination of the two-decades-long growth of the social movement. Likewise, labor unrest was a common sight starting from the 1960s into the 1970s and culminating in the Great Labor Struggle between July and September of 1987. The social movement grew increasingly radical as the state became more repressive in the 1980s. Some radical groups began to support a socialist revolution and the North Korean regime. The turning point in their approach was the Kwangju Uprising in May 1980 where hundreds of civilians protesting the imposition of the martial law lost lives at the hands of government troops.

When democracy came in 1987, it presented an opportunity for expanded participation. Citizens responded by organizing and joining new civil society groups. As a result, a large number of interest groups were organized during this period. Table 2 shows that many of the industry associations, unions, and NGOs that are currently active originated during the first three years of democracy, suggesting that democratization had a positive impact on the growth of the civil society. Democracy also brought more labor participation; strike activity surged as soon as the government agreed to the transition to democracy in June 1987 and lasted for three years.

Table 2. The Number of Interest Groups and NGOs by Year of Registration

Period	Number of Industry Associations	Number of Unions	Number of NGOs
~1980	2,031	2,393	794
1981~1986	907	2,417	765
1987~1990	209	5,901	
1991~1999	1,401	6,647	2,058

Note: Civil organizations are grouped into the 1980s and the 1990s so the number, 765, indicates the number of NGOs in the 1980s.

Source: *Annual Report of Fair Trade Commission* for the number of industry associations, *Database of Labor Economic Institute* for the number of unions, and *Directory of Korean NGOs* for the number of NGOs; Requoted from Hong and Jang (2006, 21).

Among the new citizen groups, two groups, CCEJ and PSPD, emerged in the 1990s as the pro-type citizen groups of the democracy era. CCEJ was founded in 1989 by progressive academics and citizens to promote a more equitable society through the organized



power of citizens. One of the CCEJ's early achievements was the 1993 establishment of the "real name system" for all financial transactions and for the registration of property. Since then, CCEJ activities have expanded to the areas of environmental protection, democratic development and national reunification. PSPD began in 1994 with the broad agenda of creating a democratic society that can guarantee participation and human rights. PSPD jumped to the forefront of the South Korean civil society after leading a successful campaign in 1998 for minority shareholder rights in South Korean chaebols. PSPD often aligned with foreign investors to demand more accountability from the chaebols. Another major PSPD success was the boycott campaign against "corrupt" politicians in the 2000 national assembly elections.

Social reform groups and its leaders represented the political ideology of the 386 generation of South Korean voters.² In the 2002 presidential election that brought Roh Moo-Hyun to the presidency, the 386 generation emerged as the dominant political group. 386 generation voters in 2002 were those in their 30s. Together with voters in their 20s, 386-generation voters broke with older voters and threw their support behind Roh Moo-hyun.

Roh Moo-hyun's victory not only elevated the 386 generation to the dominant voting bloc of the 2002 system also sent many of its leaders including NGO leaders to the mainstream political system. During the 2002 campaign, 386 politicians were key campaign advisors to Roh Moo-hyun and followed him to the Blue House after his electoral victory. The second infusion of 386 politicians into the positions of power took place in 2004 when at least 58 of them won seats to the National Assembly, representing 19.4 percent of the total seats (Hankook Ilbo, November 24, 2004).

The rise of the 386 generation meant a shift in ruling ideology. More than other generations, the 386ers are strongly ideological and their ideological orientations reflect the influence of a number of forces. The leaders of the 386 generation, the 386 politicians, can be best described as left-wing nationalists. Nationalism and socialism were the two leading ideologies of the student movement of the 1980s where most of the 386 politicians started their political careers. They struggled for democracy against an authoritarian regime that was pro-American, anti-North Korean, and conservative, so they were naturally attracted to opposite political values, anti-Americanism, pro-North Korean nationalism, and progressivism. Their anti-Americanism hardened in the 1980s because they believed that the U.S. military could have stopped the South Korean military's suppression of the Kwangju Uprising but did not in 1980.

By the time they propelled Roh Moo-hyun to the presidency, of course, the 386ers' political beliefs had changed. Between nationalism and socialism, the latter had weakened considerably. No major 386 politician openly advocated socialism or even social democ-



racy. But they remained strongly nationalist, that is, anti-American and pro-North Korean. A survey of newly elected Uri Party legislators in 2004 showed that all of them supported a policy of engagement with North Korea (as opposed to coercive pressure), and 50 percent of them chose China (rather than the United States) as South Korea's most important diplomatic partner (Donga Ilbo, April 16, 2004). The nationalism of the 386 generation is not limited to its leaders. Ordinary 386-generation voters are also strongly nationalistic. 36 percent of the 386ers say that they do not like the United States, while 72 percent say that they do not dislike North Korea (Song, 2005). Interestingly, the same survey reports that the voters in their 20s, so called the post-386 generation, are more anti-American and pro-North Korean than the 386-generation voters.

But it would be wrong to say that the political culture of the 386 generation is entirely ideological. Most of them, especially, ordinary voters, display post-modern tendencies. That is, they are highly individualistic and post-materialistic. They reject traditional authoritarian culture not only in politics but also in everyday life, favoring an equal and horizontal organizational culture. They are also post-materialistic in that they participate in politics for the sake of participation and self-fulfillment, not just for political competition. Thus, we can discern at least three ideological strands among the beliefs of the 386 generation, nationalism, socialism, and post-modernism. The 386ers also pioneered new styles of politics. They are media-savvy and fully immersed in the information age. The favorite mediums of politics for young voters are the internet and mobile communication devices, not traditional media of newspapers and television. They also organize differently. Instead of traditional political organizations based on money and regional ties, they prefer open access parties with strong democratic governance.

The 386-generation advisors and politicians were instrumental in moving the Roh government's policy toward economic equality and distribution, especially after 2005. In 2005, the Roh government adopted the rhetoric of economic polarization as the main theme of economic policy and proposed more conventional leftist solutions such as tax increases and more social welfare spending. Post-modern aspects of economic policy can be found in the support for popular culture industries by the Roh Moo-hyun government. As discussed before, the Roh government has given generous funding to non-mainstream media such as internet newspapers. Large amounts of government funding went into the movie industry which has been producing popular movies with strong political messages. Performing arts and literature were not an exception to the growing influence of the government.



Table3 Former PSPD Activists in Government

Administration/ Post	Kim Young-sam (1993-1998)	Kim Dae-jung (1988-2003)	Roh Moo-hyun (2003-2008)	Before 1993	Total	Percent (%)
Office of President	6	48	63	4	121	38.7
Office of Prime Minister	0	16	16	3	35	11.2
Ministries	5	27	51	5	88	28.1
Legislature	1	5	3	3	12	3.8
Judiciary	1	1	2	1	5	1.6
Independent Agencies	6	13	21	2	42	13.4
Regional Governments	3	3	2	2	10	3.2
Total	22	113	158	20	313	100.0
Percent (%)	7.0	36.1	50.5	6.4	100.0	

Source: Lew, and Wang (2006).

To support his policies, President Roh recruited new policy elites into policymaking positions, a large number of whom were 386ers and policy experts with non-mainstream backgrounds (e.g., NGO activists or academics of non-elite universities). The trend in the recruitment of new policy elites can be shown with data on the number of former NGO activists who joined the government. Table 3 shows that the number of government officials who had worked at the People Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), the leading NGO in governance reform, has shown a drastic increase since the Kim Young Sam administration. In the Kim Young Sam government, only 22 government positions have been filled by former PSPS officials. That number increased to 113 in the Kim Dae Jung government and to 158 in the Roh Moo-hyun government. The largest number of former PSPD activists went to work at the Blue House, 63 under the Roh Moo-hyun government, followed by 51 in government ministries.

While a large number of social reform group leaders, who were relatively moderate, joined the Roh Moo-hyun government and the ruling Uri Party, social movement leaders, who had stayed outside of the system even after democratization began in 1987 until resurfacing in the early 2000s, have organized a series of anti-American demonstrations since 2002. Who are these social movement groups? Social movement groups in South Korea are commonly called leftist groups, united by their strong anti-Americanism. According to Kim (2006), the leftist movement is led by seven core groups, 1) National Alliance for Democracy and Reunification of Korea (NADRK, 1991-2006) which reorganized in 2006 into Korea Alliance of Progressive Movements (KAPM), 2) South Korean Headquarters of the Pan-Korean Alliance for Reunification (1990 -), 3) Korean Federation of University Student Councils(1993 -), 4) Unification Alliance, 5) National Farmers Association (1990 -), 6) Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union, and 7) Korean Confederation of Trade

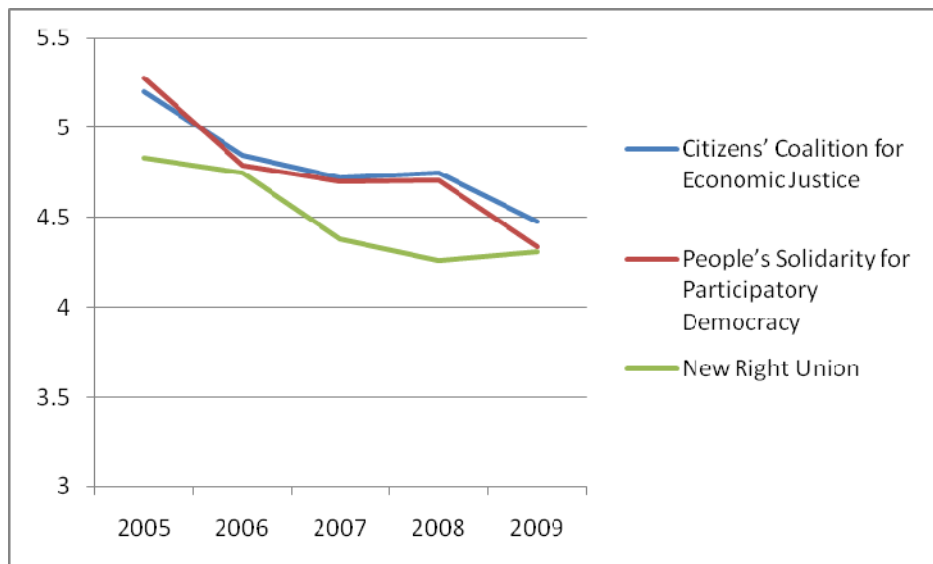


Unions (1994 -). Leaders of these seven groups formed the leadership of the Korean Alliance for KORUS FTA in 2006-2007. The seven groups were also active participants in the 2008 candle-light demonstrations against American beef imports, especially in the later, more politicized stage of the demonstrations (Go and Hahm, 2010).

It seems to be a general consensus that both social reform and social movement groups have become weaker since the election of the conservative Lee Myung-bak government in 2007. EAI-*Joongang Ilbo* surveys show that leading citizen groups such as PSPD and CCEJ receive lower ratings both in influence and trust among powerful South Korean organizations than before 2005. Three factors seem to have affected them negatively. First, the public has reacted negatively to the infusion of citizen group leaders in the Roh Moo-hyun government, which undermined the trust that people hold for citizen groups. Second, the Lee government charged citizen group leaders for financial irregularities after investigating a large number of citizen groups who received government funds under the Roh administration and cut off public funding to those groups who participated in illegal demonstrations in 2008. Third, citizen groups could not maintain access and influence under the conservative government.

Figure 1 Declining Influence of Major Citizen Groups

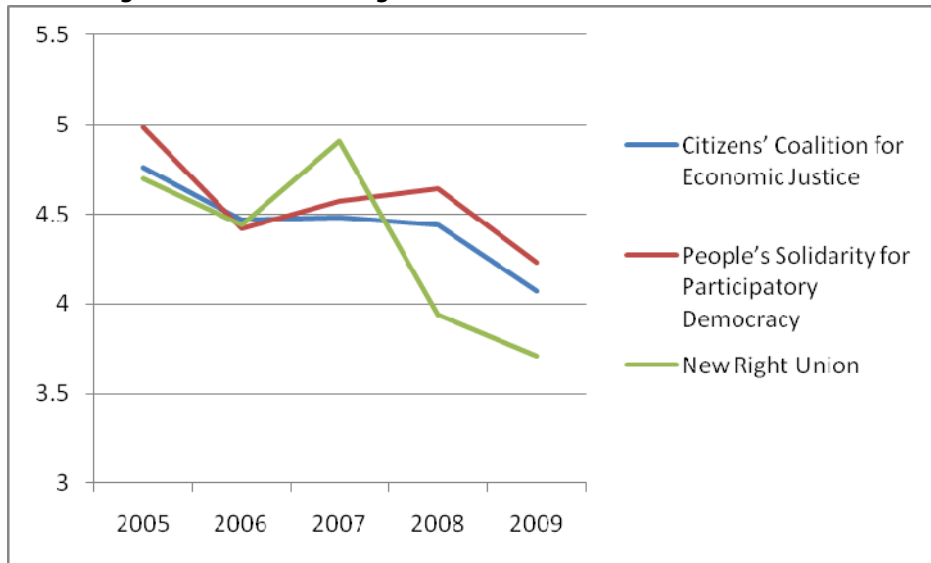
The Change of Influence Ratings 2005-2009



Source: East Asia Institute and *Joongang Daily*. *Public Trust and Influence of Power Groups, 2005-2009*.



The Change of Public Trust Ratings 2005-2009



Source: East Asia Institute and *Joongang Daily*. *Public Trust and Influence of Power Groups*, 2005-2009.

IV. Analysis of grassroots interests, strategies, and influences on the alliance

Although weakened, primary citizen groups in the shaping of the alliance remain social reform and social movement groups. In particular, PSPD and KAPM deserve special attention because of their leadership positions in the citizen group movement. The problem with citizen groups is that most of them show anti-American tendencies. So the task for South South Korean leaders who want to strengthen the U.S.-South Korean alliance is to find ways to counter or balance citizen groups in public debates and policy-making, not work with them or promote their cooperation with American citizen groups.

There are several reasons why I believe that leftist citizen groups will refuse to compromise and reject all forms of cooperation for the promotion of the U.S.-South Korean alliance. The most important reason is that anti-Americanism is their reason d'état. Anti-Americanism is what holds citizen groups together, so giving up anti-Americanism is equivalent to giving up their movement altogether. Another reason is that even moderate social reform groups, who may consider toning down anti-American rhetoric under another government, would not do so under the Lee government; hostility between citizen groups and the Lee government is mutual and deep-rooted.



So the only citizen groups with interests in the strengthening of the alliance are a small minority of citizen groups that consider themselves as conservative. Prominent conservative citizen groups are New Right Union (2005-), Citizens United for Better Society (2002-) and Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights (1996-). The primary interests of New Right Union are to uphold what it considers the founding principles of the Republic of Korea, liberal democracy and a market economy. When a group of conservative activists, led by Reverend Kim Jin-Hong, started NRU in 2005, they argued that those principles had been systematically undermined by two consecutive "leftist" governments of Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003) and Roh Moo-Hyun (2003-2008). NRU made its marks through two campaigns, the campaign against Korea Broadcasting System in 2006 and the one-million- citizen petition drive to stop the dissolution of the ROK-U.S. Combined Forces Command in 2006. During the 2007 presidential campaign, NRU actively supported the candidacy of Lee Myung-bak and many of its leaders joined his government in 2008.

Unlike most citizen groups, NRU has nation-wide local grassroots organizations. NRU is also action-oriented, displaying an ability to mobilize its members in street demonstrations, rare among conservative citizen groups. But NRU has to overcome several limitations if it wants to repeat its political successes in the future. First, NRU supporters are drawn largely from the Christian community. Second, many of NRU leaders joined the Lee Myung-bak government, casting doubt on their commitment to the civil society movement. Third, NRU has not been able to draw much attention for their activities since the conservative Lee Myung-Bak government came to office in 2008.

Since its inception in 2005, the U.S.-ROK military alliance has been the rallying point for NRU activists and supports. They believed that the left-leaning Roh Moo-Hyun government had set out to "destroy" the U.S.-ROK alliance and it was their mission to stop President Roh. NRU's primary tactics for influencing public opinion on the U.S.-ROK alliance were media campaigns and street demonstrations. Conservative South Korean newspapers, who had had disagreements with the Roh government, gave extensive coverage to NRU and its activities. NRU has organized Korean Americans in the United States from the very beginning. By 2007, they had local chapters all over the United States, including New York, Washington D.C., Atlanta and the West Coast. Organizing Korean Americans makes sense for NRU, given its commitment to the strong U.S.-South Korea alliance and its Church-centered membership composition; Most Korean Americans in the United States are organized around churches. It is interesting to note that even though NRU has been active in the United States, it has not developed significant rela-



tions with American civil society organizations. In fact, NRU does not have an English language homepage on the internet.

CUBS defines better society as one where the ideals of liberal democracy and a market economy are fulfilled, indicating that it is interested in promoting political and economic reforms necessary to achieve its goals. CUBS began in 2002, the year when the conservative Grand National Party lost the presidential election the second time in a row. As a conservative citizen group, CUBS held events supporting the GNP candidate, Lee Hoi-Chang. CUBS was the first citizen group that conservative activists organized in response to growing influence of progressive citizen groups such as PSPD. As the first group competing with progressive citizen groups, it had to cover a variety of public policy issues ranging from North Korea to education to market reforms. On the United States, CUBS has taken positions consistent with its ideology, i.e., supporting a stronger U.S.-South Korea security alliance and the KORUS FTA. Unlike NRU, CUBS leaders are mostly academics with economists comprising the largest disciplinary group, explaining their preference for academic debates and events. They have campaigned aggressively on behalf of the KORUS FTA.

Not all is good news with CUBS. Like NRU, CUBS has not been active since the beginning of the Lee government. One reason may be that with the conservative government in power, CUBS may not see as much a threat to their core agendas as before. Another possibility is that contributors to CUBS do not support CUBS activities as much under the conservative government as they did under the progressive governments. Interestingly, despite their pro-American stance, CUBS has not cultivated ties in the United States. Neither does CUBS maintain an English webpage; insiders said that they produced English content in the first few years but stopped due to lack of interest and funding.

CANKHR has since 1995 led the civil society movement in South Korea for stronger human rights in North Korea and for North Korean refugees outside of North Korea. Unlike CUBS and NRU, international cooperation has been an integral part of CANKHR activities and strategies. For example, forming an alliance with a Japanese human rights group was one of the very first official activities of CANKHR. The list of international partners that CANKHR lists on its homepage include Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Institusjonen Fritt Ord, People in Need, National Endowment for Democracy, Anti-Slavery, Catham House, and Raftustuf-telsen.

Given its international orientation, it is not surprising that CANKHR maintains an extensive English language webpage. Since 1999, the Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights has organized the International Conference on North Korean Human



Rights and Refugees across the continents in Seoul, Tokyo, Prague, Warsaw, Bergen and London. The annual conference has been the main platform for educating the international community on the conditions of human rights in North Korea and enlisting international support for North Korean human rights.

Table 4 United States-Related Activities of Major Citizen Groups in 2009

	Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice	People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)	New Right Union (NRU)	Citizens United for Better Society (CUBS)	Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights
Statements, Comments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "All actions jeopardizing the stability of Korean peninsula must be put to an end" (April 6, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Bosworth's visit to North Korea – an opportunity to turn around halted US-North Korea relations." (December 7, 2009) ▪ "A-Meat proceeds with bold lawsuit" (August 12, 2009) ▪ "Afghan dispatch – What is it for?" (June 13, 2009) ▪ "Statement of Support for a Northeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone" (May 4, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Governing is difficult, even for Obama" (January 29, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "The President should have been more cautious commenting on FTA" (November 23, 2009) ▪ "High hopes for Successful Ratification of KORUS FTA" (November 17, 2009) ▪ "CUBS welcomes parliamentary committee's decision to pass the motion to ratify KORUS FTA" (April 23, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Korea-US Summit: President Obama should address North Korean human rights issues" (November 26, 2009)
Conferences, Meetings, Forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unification Forum "A Changing Ballgame: What is Korea's response?" (September 15, 2009) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Korea-Japan Conference on Denuclearization of Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia nuclear free zone (November 23, 2009) 	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ "Obama's Foreign Policy in East Asia and Korea's Choices" (November 16, 2009) ▪ "Liberals in Korea and US and Human Rights in North Korea" (April 9, 2009) ▪ "Is KORUS FTA drifting away?: FTA at the Crossroads" (March 4, 2009) ▪ "President Obama's Inauguration and Korea-US Relations" (January 20, 2009) 	N/A
International Cooperation	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Human Rights Watch ▪ National Endowment for Democracy

Sources: Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice: <http://www.ccej.or.kr/>; Citizens United for Better Society: <http://www.cubs-korea.org/korean/>; Citizens' Alliance for North Korean Human Rights: <http://kor.nkhumanrights.or.kr/main.htm>; New Right Union: <http://www.newright.net/>; People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy: <http://blog.peoplepower21.org/>.



Being a human rights advocacy group, CANKHR has not taken a strong position on the U.S.-South Korean alliance. Yet to the extent that CANKHR is a successful example of U.S.-ROK bilateral civil society cooperation, it may already be contributing to the expansion of the alliance relationship to non-security areas. All major American human rights groups, such as National Endowment for Democracy, Human Rights, and Amnesty International, have supported and worked with CANKHR.

V. Implications for the U.S.-ROK alliance and prospects for expanding institutionalized cooperation

The influence of anti-American civil society groups on South Korean politics has waned under the conservative Lee Myong-bak government. But whether their decline is permanent is not yet clear. 386 generation voters, who represent grassroots supporters for anti-American civil society groups, still remain largely anti-American and may again play a role in bringing back a left-wing government in the future. If that happens, it is possible that anti-American civil society groups will retake the center stage of U.S.-South Korean relations. I argue here that there is probably little anyone outside can do to change the anti-Americanism of leftist civil society groups as it is the fundamental basis of their identity. What supporters of strong U.S.-South Korean relations can do instead is to recognize them as anti-American and let others know that they are anti-American. This is not to deny that citizen groups has a proper place in U.S.-South Korean relations; for example, they can and should be a watchdog to make the U.S. and South Korean governments more transparent and accountable in their dealings. Neither do I mean that the anti-American tendencies of South Korean civil society will last forever; there are already indications that younger voters in their early 20s are much less anti-American than the 386 generation voters (Woo, 2011), suggesting that when younger generations take over the leadership of civil society groups, they will be more pragmatic and less ideological. But given their history and current 386-generation-dominated leadership composition, South Korean civil society groups will, for the foreseeable future, be mired in anti-Americanism. One telling example of the extent of their innate anti-Americanism is that they did not mount significant opposition to the European Union-Korea FTA, which is projected to affect the South Korean economy more than the KORUS FTA, but now are gearing up to oppose the ratification of the renegotiated KORUS FTA.



It is equally important to recognize the limitations of pro-American civil society groups. They too have declined since Lee Myong-bak's victory in 2007. With a conservative government in power, conservative media and business groups seem now uninterested in supporting conservative citizen groups which do not have strong grassroots memberships. The fact that pro-American civil society groups are not active in international public relations also casts doubt on their future role in U.S.-South Korean relations. They can be a counter-weight to anti-American groups in South Korean domestic politics but cannot be counted on to bring together civil societies of South Korea and the United States.

The most promising area of bilateral civil society cooperation appears to be North Korean human rights. If the comprehensive alliance between the United States and ROK is to be driven by common values, the humanitarian crisis in North Korea would be one area where we would expect to see a high level of bilateral cooperation between the two countries. The two countries can benefit from bilateral cooperation because they face the same problems and challenges in all areas of the North Korean human rights issue – refugee settlement, humanitarian assistance, sanctions, the information campaign, international public opinion and international policy-making. Yet bilateral cooperation on North Korean human rights has been sparse and ineffectual, especially, at the inter-governmental level. This lack of coordinated effort at the inter-government level may encourage more cooperation at the civil society level. Indeed, we have seen more interactions among East Asian human right groups in recent years. So the North Korean human rights issue can be a good case study of whether or not the U.S.-ROK alliance can be extended to values issues and civil societies.■



Endnote

- ¹ For the role of U.S.-South Korean church networks in South Korea's democratization, see Baker (2007).
- ² A 386 person is one whose age was in her 30s in the early 2000s. The numbers 8 and 6 are added because that person would have entered college in the 80s and been born in the 60s.

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