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## South Korea's Citizens are Standing Up, but Real Change is Yet to Come

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After seven weeks of protests, South Korea's National Assembly [passed a resolution](#) to impeach President Park Geun-hye in a landslide vote of 234 to 65. This was a huge victory for a civil society that has not had many in recent years.

One of the most distinctive characteristics of these protests was the diversity of those in attendance. The 2016 movement against Park Geun-hye has inspired greater solidarity than any since 1987. The participation of youth and the white-collar middle class, who are typically too cynical about politics to bother taking action, seems to be a sure sign that civic space is undergoing a revival in South Korea. Is this the case? And if so, what are the next steps for civil society to ensure that its role in the political realm will remain a strong one in the future?

Throughout the 1990s, Korean society laid the foundation for democratization and promoted the growth of civil society. Despite the landmark changes brought about by the administration of Kim Dae-jung and the enormous support for Roh Moo-hyun's promotion of civil society, South Korea's civil society has been criticized as a "civil society without citizens." The organizational structure of South Korea's civil society organizations tends towards for-profit entities centered on men of high reputation that merely serve as yet another avenue to bolster relations between the state and large corporations, rather than amplifying the voices of citizens. This isolation of civic

organizations from the voices of the citizenry has in turn gradually increased the dependence of civil society on the state and corporations for financial support. The political shift towards conservatism during the Lee Myung-bak and Park Geun-hye administrations resulted in the elimination of many weaker groups and the near total exclusion of those remaining from politics altogether.

The civic space created through the voluntary participation of South Korea's citizens during the [anti-US beef protests](#) early in the Lee administration vanished almost as soon as it was created, after which civil society entered a state of deep freeze. The ice was broken in April 2014 with the public outcry and subsequent organization of civic groups in response to the [Sewol Ferry Disaster](#). Despite fierce protests, the voices of the citizens that poured out across the nation were unable to penetrate the willfully deaf ears of the government and politicians and translate into visible political achievements. This cycle of protest and failure led to a deep-seated sense of resignation and total helplessness, accompanied by anger and cynicism, among South Koreans desperate for change.

But the protests that erupted after the revelations over [Choi Soon-sil Gate](#) have been different. After the repeated failures of civil society to effect real change, the citizenry distrusts the government and politicians, and believe that democracy in Korea functions in favor of a few elites as opposed to all. The gap

*“...civil society is a political space where a variety of voices exist in disorder. Civil society must attain the capacity to institutionalize this kind of disorder by expanding their outreach to the citizens.”*

between the privileged and the disadvantaged continues to increase. Despite the existence of a democratic system that emphasizes the rule of law, there is a perception that abiding by the rules does one no good, and that in fact compliance with laws and institutions often brings harm rather than social recognition and success. To many, the monopoly of Choi Soon-sil over state affairs is a perfect metaphor for the perceived lack of common sense and pervasive injustice that prevail in Korean society. The fact that a [behind-the-scenes group](#) instead of the rightfully elected government has been exercising power over the country provoked resentment and caused many to come out to the plaza. In other words, these protests were not merely another spontaneous outburst of anger, but rather a culmination of the condensed anger of the citizens fuelled by social inequality, intensified polarization, and declining opportunities for social mobility.

The vast majority of experts interpret the seven candlelight vigils and subsequent decision to impeach Park as a victory for direct democracy and civic politics. In fact, the passing of the impeachment proposal denotes a new beginning and challenge. Although we witnessed a shared sense of solidarity in the citizen movement in 2016, two months is not enough time to change Korean civil society, Korean citizens, and Korean politics.

Park Won-ho, a professor of political science at Seoul National University, warns that a second and third Park Geun-hye could appear in the future depending on how well civil society responds to the demands for democracy brought forth by the citizens in the recent movement. In the past, these demands failed to be institutionalized and the movement lost its momentum because civil society was indifferent to channeling them into the political process and decision-making.

In order to sustain political movements and civic engagement, civil society must overcome the idea of the “spontaneous myth” that is prevalent in Korean society. This myth is perpetuated by political institutions seeking to denigrate citizen voices by ascribing them to some other political force rather than the spontaneous will of the people. The people then respond defensively to this attack and generate their own myth that the only “legitimate” participation is that of the voluntary individual, thus delegitimizing civic organization.

Overcoming this myth requires recognition of the fact that the organization of citizens does not mean denying institutional politics or replacing government with independent civil power. Rather, it means a true sustainable participatory democracy, where opinions expressed and organized by demonstrators have an appropriate and consistent communication channel with institutionalized politics.

Civil Society is often narrowly defined as the activities of civic groups, but in fact civil society is a political space where a variety of voices exist in disorder. Civil society must attain the capacity to institutionalize this kind of disorder by expanding their outreach to the citizens. Otherwise, just as in the past, 2016 is likely to end up as a one-time eruption if civil society stays dependent upon the good will and spontaneity of the citizens. ■

— Seokho Kim is a professor of sociology at Seoul National University. He earned his Ph.D. in sociology from the University of Chicago and has published numerous articles on the role of civil society including *The Quality of Civil Society and Participatory Democracy in ISSP Countries* (2016) and *What Made the Civic Dimension of National Identity More Important among Koreans?* (2015).