

# Changing Cross-movement Coalitions between Labor Unions and Civil Society Organizations in South Korea

BYOUNG-HOON LEE | CHUNG-ANG UNIVERSITY

*In South Korea's modern history the cross-movement relationship between labor activism/ unions and civil society organizations has evolved from the resistance coalition under the developmental state (~1987), through the diverging coalitions in the post-democratization period (1988~1997), to the hollowed-out coalitions under the post-1997 neoliberal regime (from 1998 on). This case study finds that the cross-movement coalition of labor unions and civil society organizations in Korea has demonstrated distinct characteristics in its dynamics and configuration that are rarely observed in the Western advanced countries. The cross-movement relationship between unions and civil society organizations, evolving in the context of the Korean political economy, demonstrates divergent configurations of ideological lines, ranging from the radical coalition, through the progressive and the liberal ones, to the conservative one. This case study also finds that there coexist multiple union-CSO coalitions competing for public leverage, and that the incidence and intensity of cross-movement coalitions could be contradictory, as evinced by the broadening networking and lowering cohesiveness in the union-CSO coalitions in the recent period of neoliberal regime. The marginalization of labor unions in the terrain of cross-movement coalitions symbolizes the overlapped crises of internal (organized-unorganized) and external (union-CSO) solidarities, that Korean labor union movement are faced with at present.*

**Keywords:** labor union, civil society organization, cross-movement coalition, solidarity, South Korea

## Introduction

South Korea (hereafter Korea) has undergone a compressed transformation over the past five decades. This Asian country has witnessed remarkable societal changes through economic development, political democratization, and the post-modernization of civil society between 1960s and 2000s. As a consequence, the governance of its political economy has transformed from a developmental dictatorship driving compressed industrialization, to the democratized market regime, dominated by the neoliberal policy logic. During the last three decades (from 1980s until the present), in particular, labor unions and civil society movement have shown a diachronic trajectory of ups and downs, whereas the dominance of strong state and big businesses, so-called 'chaebols', has been kept intact in the governance of the Korean political economy.

In the compressed transformation of the country's political economy, three critical junctures exerted crucial influence on the relationship between the state, business and civil society as well as the relationship between labor unions and civil society movements. The first juncture was Tae-Il Chun's self-immolation, which attracted public attention to the dehumanized situation of the working class in the rapidly industrializing Korea and led civil society organizations (CSO) to begin launching labor activism for protecting and organizing workers. The second one was the political democratization, occurring in 1987, which dismantled the authoritarian regime and produced the burgeoning of labor union and civil society movements. The third one was the economic crisis, taking place in late 1997, which imposed neoliberal restructuring on the national economy, including financial and public sectors, and labor markets. Going through these critical junctures, civil society movements have been diversified over time, and labor unions have shown a relationship of both coalition and contest with civil social movements in demanding the socio-economic reforms and the resolution of workers issues.

This paper sets out to delineate the historical evolution of relationship between labor unions and civil society organizations (CSOs) over the past four decades from the 1970s up to now, and examine what induced substantial changes in the union-CSO relationship, passing through the three critical junctures. The coalition between labor unions and civil society organizations in non-Western developing countries have hardly been explored in the existing English literature. In this light, the case of Korea

might be of interest, since the relationship and interaction between labor unions and CSOs have embraced more complicated dynamics in the compressed transformation of its political economy, compared to Western advanced countries. The paper is comprised of four sections, as follows: the next section presents a literature review concerning the relationship between labor unions and civil society movements and indicates focal points of the case analysis. The following three sections cover the historical evolution of the cross-movement coalition between labor activism/unions and CSOs under the three subsequent stages – the developmental state (1970-1987), post-democratization (1987-1997), and neoliberal restructuring (1998 to the present). The concluding section addresses some theoretical implications drawn from this case study.

## Literature Review on Cross-movement Relationship between Labor Unions and Civil Society Organizations

A country's political economy regime is chiefly shaped by the interaction and power relationship among key actors of three realms - the political (state and political parties), the economic (businesses), and the societal realms (labor unions and civil social organizations). In the triangular relationship, the state and business actors tend to dominate the governance of the capitalist market regime, while the civil society, represented by a variety of voluntary associations and interest organizations, resists and regulates the dominance of the state and business (Ehrenberg 2002; Urry 1983). As is well addressed by the varieties of capitalism literature, institutional arrangements, built on the political interplay among those actors, vary across nation states, and have changed over time in each nation state.

In the modern history of capitalist regime, unions and CSOs are key actors of the civil society that play a decisive role in configuring and balancing the relationships with the state and the market. Unions are the traditional association that advocated the interests of the working class and influenced the shaping of labor regime and politico-economic institutional arrangements during the era of industrial capitalism (Lee, C. 2007; Pichardo 1997). Unions institutionalize collective bargaining and dispute action to exempt workers from market competition and employers' exploitative control. They represent the general interest of working people in the state's labor and social welfare policies through their strategic use of mass mobilization and political leverage and, as a consequence, make significant

contributions toward the advancement of industrial citizenship for people at work in the industrializing economies (Müller-Jentsch 1991). Thus, unions are said to have multiple identities, such as a labor market regulator, anti-capitalist organization and civic association (Hyman 2001).

Civil society movements (CSMs), referring to a diverse array of collective actions led by non-profit or non-government organizations (NPOs/NGOs) (Abbott, Heery and Williams 2012; Buechler 1995; Heery, Williams and Abbott 2012b), take advantage of the favorable political opportunity structure of the democratized society and exert growing influence over the state and market in the post-industrial era (Tarrow 1998). Those CSOs advocate a variety of class-unspecific interest of post-modern citizenship, such as human rights, feminism, environmentalism, and social minorities, and campaign identity-based movements at the national and community levels, in contrast to labor unions geared at the class-based interest representation (Heery, Abbott and Williams 2012a; Offe 1985). These new social movements, which Offe (1985) distinguishes from the old movement led by labor unions, provide a substantial counter-force to challenge and revolt against the domination and colonization of civic life world by the state and market. Moreover, the civil society movements have gained societal significance under the contemporary stage of neo-liberal globalization, in that these movements have raised voices for a growing number of unprotected working people in response to union decline (Heery et al. 2012a, 2012b; Lee, C. 2007). Given the shrinking organizational coverage and weakening political leverage of labor unions during the recent decades, many civil society organizations have increasingly had active involvement in protecting the interest of vulnerable workforce suffering from labor market flexibilization (Abbott et al. 2012; Freeman 2005; Heery et al. 2012b). In addition, they have played a visible role of coalition partners to assist organizing campaigns and revitalizing efforts made by labor unions, while criticizing self-interested behaviors of labor unions coopted by the state and business (Lee, C. 2007).

Even though the coalition of labor unions and civil society organizations has been more significant in the context of neoliberal globalization, this cross-movement coalition does not always move ahead in the right track. Labor unions and civil society organizations differ inherently from each other in many respects, such as movement logic, organizational form, constituency, concerned issues and pursued value/cause, and mode of action (Buechler 1995; Cho 1996; Offe 1985; Pichardo 1997; Suzuki 2008). Therefore, the cross-movement relationship between the two groups might be shaped in diverse directions, depending on structural conditions and

institutional context, the presence/absence of common interest and shared framing, and the behavioral/attitudinal orientation of agency. In the same vein, Heery et al. (2012b), examining the LU-CSO relationship in the U.K., demonstrate that there exists no single dominant pattern of the relationship, but rather multiple forms, including coalition, contest/conflict, and difference. A variety of factors, such as conflicting interest, differing framing perspective and organizational norms, contrasting nature of constituents and leaders, the lack of competent bridge-builders, and rivalry for societal roles and leverage, are likely to create antipathy and mistrust between the two groups, thereby resulting in mutual distancing/apathy and clashes of activism in the cross-movement relationship (Craft 1990; Heery et al. 2012b). Even when LU-CSO coalitions are forged, the level of coalitions might be diverse, ranging from an ad hoc pattern to supportive and deep patterns, depending on the nature of common concern, the structure of organizational relationships, organizational capacity and commitment, and the scale of coalition activities (Tattersall and Reynolds 2007). The nature of LU-CSO coalitions also varies, in terms of their pursued goals, from the coalition of protest, mobilizing campaigns against the state and business, to that of influence, attempting to shape the agenda and process of public policy, and that of service, organizing voluntary work to enhance the quality of working citizens' life (Heery et al. 2012b).

As discussed above, the existing studies regarding labor union and social movement offer a useful analytical lens to examine the relationship and interaction between the two movement organizations. At the same time, those studies may have limitations in applying their theoretical approach toward cross-movement relationship to non-Western developing countries, since they chiefly draw on the historical and contemporary evolution of labor unions and civil society movements in the Western advanced countries. The non-Western developing countries, including Korea, have the contextual setting, distinct from those Western counterparts, conditioning the interaction between labor unions and civil society organizations. As a matter of fact, the former is to a certain extent different from the latter in many aspects (i.e. historical trajectory of modernization and nation state building, institutionalization of labor unions and civil society movements, democratization of political regime and maturation of civil society, state-business-labor power relationship, the presence of political parties representing the working class, economic development and industrialization, social stratification, cultural background and societal norms, and national issues at risk). For instance, the new social movement literature, which

theorizes a paradigmatic distinction between the modern labor union movement and the post-modern civil society movement in the historical development of Western civil societies, provides plausible theoretical points for conceptualizing the union-CSO relationship in the non-Western developing countries. At the same time, this school is unable to decode the more complicate interaction between the two movement groups evolving under the non-Western context, particularly where there is a distinct configuration of state-market-civil society in the late democratization process. In this light, it might be necessary to re-capture the dynamics of cross-movement coalition between labor unions and CSOs and examine their interplay with the state and businesses under the unique context of the non-Western developing political economies.

### Resistance Coalition of Labor Activism and Civil Society Movement in the Era of Developmental State (~1987)

In Korea's modern history, the development of civil society was decisively constrained by a series of tragic convulsions, such as Japanese colonization, national division, the Korean War (1950-1953) and the subsequent Cold War, the failed April Revolution of 1960, and the military coups of 1961 and 1980. Moreover, the country's under-developed economy and authoritarian political regime hindered the growth of civil society during the 1950s-1960s.

Labor unions were organized on a massive scale on the initiative of the General Council of Korean Trade Unions (GCKTU, called *Chunpyung* in Korean), right after the national liberation of 1945. However, *Chunpyung* and its affiliates were forcefully dissolved by the United States Army Military Government (USAMG) as they were thought to follow the political direction of the Communist Party, and displaced by the federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU, *Hankooknochoong* in Korean) established under the patronage of President Syngman Rhee, and intended to foster the anti-communist labor union movement. As a consequence, the FKTU-led unions were a stalwart sub-partner controlled by President Rhee's authoritarian state until the end of 1950s. In 1960, the democratization of the FKTU was attempted by some union activists, taking advantage of the favorable political opportunity structure, given by the April Revolution of that year, but these attempts were crushed by the Military Government. President Park Chung-hee, taking power through the military coup of 1961, reshuffled the leadership of the FKTU and forcefully reorganized its affiliates into industrial unions, thereby

making labor unions to remain loyal followers tightly supervised under his police state.

Civil society movements in general hardly had a visible presence between 1950s and 1960s, since civil rights were to a large extent suppressed by the authoritarian state on the pretext of defending national security from the threat of North Korea. During this period, however, student movement demonstrated civic activism to strenuously resist the authoritarian dictatorship and political corruptions. The student movement led public revolts against the corrupted election manipulated by President Rhee's government, resulting in the collapse of his 12-year dictatorship in April, 1960. It remained the most powerful voice challenging President Park's authoritarian state and demanded political democratization during the period of his reign (1961-1979).

In 1970, a worker's death, Tae-Il Chun's self-immolation, became the trigger for forging the first coalition between labor activism and social movements on the scene of Korean civil society. Chun's death caused a great reverberation in student activists and other civic groups (i.e. Christian churches), by making them notice that the working class grew sharply along with the state-led industrialization and the industrial workers' miserable shop floor life, caused by employers' exploitative control, came to the fore as the key societal issue to be tackled by civil society movements. Those activists also became conscious that the government's interventionist labor policy, supporting export-driven economic development, suppressed workers' rights rather than protecting their complaints, while labor unions often sided with employers against the rank-and-file.

In the 1970s, as a consequence, many student activists opened night schools around industrial zones to educate workers about labor laws and unionization, and some of them turned into labor activists for organizing unions and democratizing the existing yellow unions. Some progressive religious groups, including the Urban Industrial Missionary Center in Seoul, began providing not only labor counsel to deal with complaints that workers brought in against employers' illegal mistreatment, but also a sanctuary to protect workers and labor activists involved in protest action against employers from police arrest. Workers increasingly staged protests against inhumane treatment and inferior working conditions, and organized 'democratic' labor unions, independent from employers' control and cooption. Confronted with brutal suppression by employers and the state's police army, those democratic unions were short-lived, with the dismissal of union leaders and activists. In struggling for their survival, the democratic

unions often formed resistance coalitions with student movements and religious groups to denounce the state's employer-favored police action. Ironically, however, the state's suppression of the democratic unions contributed to the sudden collapse of President Park's 18-year dictatorship. In late 1979, when female workers, who organized a democratic union at YH trading company, engaged in sit-in strike action to protest against employers' illegal union suppression at the opposition party (*Shinmin-dang* in Korean), the government did not only order police riot troops to break forcefully up striking workers, causing the death of a union activist named Kyung-Sook Kim, but also deprived the protesting opposition party leader, Kim Young-sam, of the National Assembly membership. President Park's hardline actions provoked massive public uprisings and ultimately resulted in his assassination by a top aide on October 26, 1979.

The short period of democratization following the break-down of President Park's regime came to an end with a military coup led by General Chun Doo-hwan, who seized power by launching bloody military campaigns to repress Kwangju people protesting for democratization in May, 1980. President Chun extended the authoritarian regime by keeping labor unions under control and constraining civil rights, including presidential election and media expression. Despite the strict control by President Chun's police state, student activism and democratic labor movement was further vitalized in the early 1980s, a development decisively influenced by the Kwangju democratization struggle. Student movements did not just pose the stronger challenge to the President Chun's illegitimate gain of the political power, but also became more radicalized in terms of ideological inclination. Many student activists began circulating Marxist literature and taking about Socialist revolution and the avant-garde role of the working class. Thus, thousands of student activists got into plants in order to organize industrial workers each year during this period. The massive inrush of student activists into workplace invigorated and radicalized the democratic union movement. In fact, labor activists, recruited from student movements, formed many underground circles to organize democratic unions and stage campaigns challenging employers' despotic workplace control as well the police state. In 1985, for instance, those labor activists engaged in coalition strike action with democratic unions in the Guro Industrial Complex in the south-west of Seoul and held violent demonstrations mobilizing worker-student solidarity campaigns against President Chun's totalitarian reign in Incheon and Seoul.

The mid 1980s witnessed a widespread public sympathy toward student-led democratization movement, since the growing middle class, along with



their improving living standards, became more critical of President Chun's authoritarian regime. Eventually, the death of a tortured student activist, Jong-cheol Park, triggered massive public protests, leading to the dismantlement of the authoritarian regime and democratization of the country's political system in the summer of 1987. Subsequently, in the autumn of that year, the Great Labor Struggles, which broke out under the changing political opportunity structure, caused by the collapse of the authoritarian state, demonstrated the huge explosion of workers protests against employers' inhumane mistreatments all over the country.

To sum up, the relationship between labor activism and civil society movement until 1987 is characterized as 'resistance solidarity', in which the civil society movement, largely led by student activism, played a key role in not simply challenging the authoritarian state, but also defending and nurturing democratic labor movements to protest against employers' despotic workplace control and the state's interventionist labor policy, coopting the existing FKTU-affiliated unions as a sub-partner.

### Diverging Coalitions of Labor Unions and Civil Society Organizations in the Period of Post-democratization (1988~1997)

The democratization of 1987 substantially reshaped the landscape of the state-market-civil society relationship. Business and civil society, grown from the sustained economic development, were freed from the fetter of the authoritarian state, and the key actors representing the civil society also changed drastically: the student movement, having played the lead role in the pre-1987 civil society movements, was attenuated in the context of political democratization and taken over by labor unions and civic NGOs, which grew remarkably after the democratization.

The Great Labor Struggle of 1987 induced labor movement to sharply augment its organizational presence. Between 1986 and 1989, the number of labor unions nearly tripled (from 2,742 to 7,883), while the total size of membership nearly doubled from 1,050,000 to 1,931,000. Union density soared from 11.7% to 18.6% (Lee, B. 2011a). The explosive growth of labor movement did not only result in the remarkable enhancement of working conditions, including wage increases, but also the guarantee of industrial citizenship to workers through the institutionalization of collective bargaining. Moreover, along with unions having societal muscle to mobilize

collective action, labor movements became recognized as key social actors, and their representatives were invited to the government's policy consultation, such as the National Economic-Social Council (1990-1995) and the Presidential Commission on Industrial Relations Reform (PCIRR, 1996-1997), in 1990s. At the same time, the labor movement was divided between the FKTU affiliates and democratic unions. Those democratic unions, which proliferated massively against a backdrop of political democratization and the Great Labor Struggle, formed their own national center, called the Korean Trade Union Congress (*Cheonnohyup* in Korean), in 1991, which later turned into the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU, *Minjunochong* in Korean), merging unions at large firms and in white-collar sectors, in 1995. The two national centers have represented different lines of labor movement (moderate reformism of the FKTU versus militant social movement unionism of the KCTU), so they have shown the yo-yo relationship between coalition and contention in dealing with policy and legislative issues over time.

The 1987 democratization led to a remarkable growth of civil society movements, while witnessing the student movements' drastic decline.<sup>1</sup> In addition to the existing people movement organizations, which formed in the pre-1987 period, a growing number of civic NGO/NPOs were formed in 1990s. According to 2000 Korean Civil Organizations Directory, 62.0% out of 4,905 civil organizations, whose year of establishment was identified by the 1999 survey, were formed during 1990s (Eun 2004). Those civil organizations addressed a variety of class-unspecific issues, including female discrimination and motherhood protection, environmental sustainability, social welfare, clean election, human rights of minorities (i.e. the disabled and immigrants), governance transparency of private and public sectors, as might be viewed as having the characteristics of 'new social movement' coined by Offe (1985). The noticeable proliferation of civil society organizations cannot simply be attributed to the political democratization, but also explained by such factors as the growing right consciousness of middle class citizens over their life world, government's indifference and business' infringement of civic living conditions, political parties' inability to address civic issue agenda, and a large influx of former labor and student activists into civil movements (Kang S. 2012).

Civil society organizations, established between the late 1980s and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Despite its decline, the student movement played a significant role to supply activist resources to labor unions and civil society organizations.

middle of the 1990s, might be classified into two groups, in terms of their issue coverage: the ones are comprehensive bodies, exemplified by the Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice (CCEJ, formed in 1989) and the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD, formed in 1994), to cover diverse civic issues, whereas the others are professional ones specializing in a specific civic agenda (Kang, I. 2011). More significantly, civil society movements could be also categorized into three groups by ideological difference (Cho, H. 1995). The first is the so-called 'people movement (*minjungundong* in Korean)' group, which represents the interests of underclasses, such as the poor and peasants, and resorts to militant mobilization demanding radical reforms of the country's political economy. The second and the third groups, both called 'civil movement (*shiminundong* in Korean)', commonly represent the new middle class, but the second, liberal group, exemplified by the CCEJ, which takes moderate and pragmatic approach toward civic issues, whereas the third, progressive group, led by the PSPD, seeks for the active solution to reform structural problems of the Korean society.

Given the differing ideological lines of labor unions and civil society organizations, the cross-movement coalition was diverged in a form of "birds of a feather" (Cho, D. 1996). On the one hand, the FKTU and liberal CSOs, led by the CCEJ, formed a series of coalition bodies to bring forward such reformist issues through moderate civic campaigns. These issues included electoral corruption, real-name financial transaction and independence of the national bank (Bank of Korea) from the government's interventionist supervision, nongovernment exchange between South and North Korea, the preservation of indigenous rice, and the still-sensitive issue of sex slavery perpetrated by the Japanese imperialist army in World War II. On the other, the KCTU and people's movement organizations staged radical anti-government coalition campaigns to protest against the conservative government's suppression of democratic unions to demand the guarantee of the working people's right to live, and self-reliant unification policy, in a militant manner. The progressive CSO, including the PSPD, located at the in-between position, engaged in their own civic action to demand the reforms of the country's political-economy regime (like chaebol reformation and provision of universal welfare service), and often assisted the KCTU-led coalitions protesting against the government's repressive stance to illegalize the national center of democratic unions. Despite diverging movement lines, however, labor unions and CSOs joined the nationwide coalition campaigns to resist the government's undemocratic snatching action, pushing ahead

with its unilateral revision of labor laws to promote the flexibility of labor markets in the absence of opposition lawmakers at the end of 1996. Between December of 1996 and February of 1997, the FKTU and the KCTU engaged in unprecedented general strikes and most CSOs took an active part in the anti-government campaigns to mobilize public protests. The public uprising, led by labor unions and CSOs, forced the government to re-revise the concerned laws in March, 1997. The 1996-1997 anti-government campaigns demonstrated the union-CSO coalition's political muscle.

In short, the post-democratization period witnessed not only notable advances in union movement and civil society movements, but also diverging streams of cross-movement coalition. At the end of the period, union-CSO coalition holding nationwide public protest campaigns frustrated the state's unilateral action to break the societal norms of democracy. At the same time, it is noteworthy that cross-movement coalitions, including the 1996-1997 anti-government protests, corresponds to an ad hoc pattern among the multi-levels of coalition, classified by Tattersall and Reynolds (2007), in that they were built for launching short-term joint campaigns to address specific policy issues.

### Hollowed Coalition of Labor Unions and Civil Society Organizations in the Period of Neoliberal Restructuring (1998~)

In the late 1997, two historic events brought about significant changes in the country's political economy and the contextual setting surrounding labor unions and civil society organizations. The first was an unprecedented economic crisis, taking the country to the brink of financial exchange bankruptcy, while the other is the first peaceful political power shift to the opposition party, whose candidate Kim Dae-jung won in the presidential election. Confronted with the economic crisis, President Kim's 'so-called democratic' government launched extensive neoliberal reforms on the four economic areas, such as public and financial sectors, corporate governance, and labor market, accepting the restructuring agenda of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which offered emergency loans. President Kim Dae-jung also formed the Tripartite Commission to obtain cooperation from organized labor in overcoming the economic crisis and undertaking the neoliberal reforms. Neoliberal restructuring helped the country's economy make a quick recovery, but also had detrimental effects on society,

particularly labor markets. In the context of the economic crisis and the state-led neoliberal restructuring, permanent jobs sharply decreased from 7.5 million (56.8%) in 1996 to 6.4 million (47.9%) in 2000, whereas contingent jobs grew rapidly from 5.7 million (43.2%) to 7 million (52.1%) during the same period. The neoliberal economic policy remained intact in another democratic government (2003-2007) led by President Rho Moo-hyun, and was even further strengthened under the conservative government (2008-2012), led by President Lee Myung-bak. Under the neoliberal regime, economic inequality worsened, as evinced by the fact that GINI coefficients rose from 0.264 in 1997 to 0.313 in 2011 and earnings dispersion between top 20% and bottom 20% urban households widened from 3.97 to 5.96 during the same period. As a consequence, socio-economic polarization, chiefly caused by the proliferation of the non-regular workforce and the growing labor market segmentation, came to fore as the core issue confronting civil society and labor union movement during the past 15 years.

During the period of the neoliberal regime, the labor union movement has been weakened substantially, in terms of its organizational capacity and social leverage. Union density, which peaked at 18.6% in 1990, declined to 11.4% in 1998 and further went down to 9.9% in 2011. The more crucial problem is that the labor union movement has experienced a crisis of solidarity, in that labor unions have had a growing tendency to focus on the self-interests of insiders (union members) within the boundary of the enterprise and exclude the interest of unorganized outsiders (i.e. non-regular workers and workers at small firms) (Lee, B. 2011b). Some unions, particularly the KCTU affiliates, transformed their organizational structure from the enterprise-based model to the industry-based one, in order to expand their organizational coverage and tackle labor market segmentation, but failed to build centralized bargaining (owing to large firms' resistance) and drive the organizing of unprotected workforce (Lee and Yi 2012). Labor union movement has lost its muscle of en masse mobilization, since the rank and file became conservatized and indifferent to labor issues beyond workplaces along with their improving living standards and experience of redundancies during the economic crisis (Lee, B. 2011b). As such, the labor union movement has seen the attenuation of its organizational capacity and societal influence under the neoliberal regime, furthered by the union exclusion policy of President Lee's business-friendly government.

In contrast, civil society movement has shown a notable growth during this period. According to The Korean Civil Organizations Directory, the number of civil organizations increased from 7,600 in 1999 to 25,886 in

2009.<sup>2</sup> The remarkable burgeoning of the civil society movement was stimulated by the pro-CSO policy of the democratic governments, led by President Kim (People's Government) and President Roh (Participatory Government), which offered financial support to CSO activities. At the same time, CSOs, gaining societal leverage over the government's policy-making, have over time exposed such weaknesses as lack of citizen participation, heavy reliance on public media and political lobby, professional-dominated activities, and a monadic pattern of activism (Kang, S. 2012; Lee, H. 2004; Park 1998).

Meanwhile, noticeable trends in the civil society movements have emerged; the development of conservative and cyber civil movements. On the one hand, the established civil groups, like conservative Christian churches, military veteran organizations, and senior citizen associations, were critical of the democratic governments' peaceful policy toward North Korea, and joined to forge the conservative civil movement. Those conservative CSOs not only engaged in protest demonstrations against those governments, but also mobilized campaigns to denounce the activities of radical and progressive CSOs as well as labor unions.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, the country's civil society movement became further diversified along with the collective grouping of the conservative CSOs, which show a hostile attitude toward other CSOs. On the other hand, cyber civic movement, internet-based networking for voluntary citizen mobilization, came to fore for the first time in 2002, when students and citizens disseminated the news of a traffic accident in which the US army's tank killed two female middle school students (whose names were Mi-seon and Hyo-sun) and voluntarily held public campaigns to protest against the government's lukewarm reaction and the unequal US-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), by using the internet network. The cyber movement has had a growing significance in the public sphere of civil society, catalyzed by the rapid diffusion of social network service (SNS) and civic activists' turning to the internet-based mobilization. The great muscle of the cyber movement is exemplified by the massive candle light demonstrations to protest when the President Lee's government ignored widespread concern over bovine spongiform encephalopathy (commonly known as BSE, or 'mad cow disease') in its hardline policy to import meats from the US in 2008, and the so-called 'Hope

---

<sup>2</sup> The number of NPOs, registered to Ministry of Security and Public Administration, is also reported to grow from 7241 in 2007 to 11,070 as of March, 2013

<sup>3</sup> Those conservative CSOs contributed to Lee Myung-bak's victory in the 2007 presidential election to a large extent.

Bus' campaigns that showed public sympathy for laid-off workers' prolonged struggle against the downsizing of the Hanjin Heavy Industry in 2010.

Given the changing terrain of civil society, illustrated by the shrinking labor movement and the burgeoning civil society movement, cross-movement coalitions between labor unions and CSOs, except conservative ones, have proliferated noticeably, mainly mobilizing ad hoc solidarity action to protest against the neoliberal policy of the democratic period and the unilateral policy-making under President Lee's government.<sup>4</sup> The increasing cross-movement coalitions might be explained by the invigorated protest networking of labor unions and CSOs, with both having common concerns over neoliberal government policy having damaging impact on the life of working citizens. Despite the growing incidence of cross-movement coalitions, however, the intensity of those coalitions has weakened, implying that their inter-organizational cohesiveness and public leverage has become shallow and limited in pressuring the governments to change the policy, as happened in early 1997 (Eun 2004). A notable change in the cross-movement coalitions is that, in contrast to the 1990s, when labor unions, particularly the KCTU, occupied a centric position in the coalitions, the leadership of the coalitions in the 2000s has been taken up by progressive CSOs like the PSPD. They have taken a leading role in setting policy agenda and mobilizing campaigns, with the labor unions marginalized (Chang 2003; Eun 2004). Moreover, contested schisms in the cross-movement coalitions have often appeared between KCTU-affiliated unions and radical CSOs on the one side versus progressive and liberal CSOs on the other. Good examples of this, illustrating the schism of the cross-movement coalition, are the contentions of the two sides with regards to the fixed-term workers protection law and the work permit system for immigrant workers, introduced under the Participatory Government. As for both cases, the KCTU and people movement organizations put up stiff opposition to the government's policy action, whereas the progressive and liberal CSOs took a positive stance, viewing this action as acceptable for improving the working conditions of non-regular and immigrant workforce.

In summary, the union-CSO coalitions have over time become hollowed-out under the post-1997 regime, witnessing the attenuating of labor union movements and the notable growth of civil society movements, including conservative and cyber civic activism. The hollowed cross-

---

<sup>4</sup> The number of cross-movement coalition bodies doubled from 15 in the late 1990s to over 30 in the early 2000s (Eun 2004).

movement coalitions can be evinced by the declining intensity and societal leverage of the coalitions as well as the appearance of schismatic contest between labor unions and CSOs, in spite of the proliferation of those coalitions during the past 15 years. As a result, the union-CSO coalitions have been losing their movement efficacy to some extent, although there are a few exceptions, like the 2008 candle light demonstrations and the 2010 'Hope Bus' campaigns.

## Conclusion: Summary and Implications

In Korea's modern history the cross-movement relationship between labor activism/unions and civil society organizations has evolved from the resistance coalition under the developmental state (~1987), through the diverging coalitions in the post-democratization period (1988~1997), and the hollowed coalitions under the post-1997 neoliberal regime (from 1998 on). The changing nature of coalition actors and issues over the three historic stages is summarized in Table 1.

**TABLE 1.**  
**HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF UNION-CSO COALITIONS IN THE KOREAN CIVIL SOCIETY**

Historical Stage	Labor Unions	CSOs	Labor-CSO coalition
Developmental State (~1987)	FKTU affiliates coopted by the state and employers; Challenges by democratic unions and labor activists	Student movement in the leading role and some progressive religious groups	Demanding democratization and the protection of labor rights; Radicalized in 1980s
Post-Democratization (1988~1997)	Division & competition between the FKTU & KCTU affiliates	Growth & divergence of CSOs	Diversified cross-movement coalitions from moderate reformist to radical protests
Neoliberal Regime (1998~)	Organizational shrinkage & attenuation of labor union movements	Continued growth & divergence of CSOs; Advent of cyber movement	Increasing, yet hollowed-out coalitions, protesting against neoliberal policy



This case study finds that the cross-movement coalition of labor unions and civil society organizations in Korea has demonstrated distinct characteristics in its dynamics and configuration, which are rarely observed in the Western advanced countries. Thus, some comparatively meaningful implications, drawn from the Korean case, are addressed for broadening theoretical understanding of union-CSO relationship beyond the contextual setting of the Western countries. Firstly, compared with the theoretical framework of the New Social Movement literature, which presents a simplified typology of old and new social movements emerging in Western civil society, the cross-movement relationship between unions and civil society organizations evolving in the context of the Korean political economy demonstrates more divergent configurations of ideological lines, including radical, progressive and liberal, and even conservative, coalitions. Moreover, in contrast to the Western social movement literature, capturing the paradigmatic shift from the old class-based (labor union) movement to the new class-unspecific civil society movement, the union-CSO relationship in Korea has over time shown more complex dynamics in transforming from the student movement-led coalition in the stage of developmental state, through the union-led one in the post-democratization period, to the multi-polarized one plus cyber networking in the stage of neoliberal globalization. The diverging configuration and dynamic transition of the union-CSO coalitions in Korea might be explained by the macro-level contextual factors, such as late democratization, compressed industrialization, divided nation and South-North Korea confrontations, the legacy of strong state, and finally the lack or weak presence of progressive political parties to represent working citizens' interest. This is also attributed to the micro-level actor-related factors, including the inter-generational difference of interest and values among workers and citizens (as demonstrated by the contesting political attitude between the youth and the elder), subsequent changes in public interests or concerns, diversified movement visions that activists in unions and various civil society organizations embrace, and authoritarian orientation of the ruling elites (in the state and business) simultaneously provoking class-based and class-unspecific issues to the civil society.

Secondly, the union-CSO relationship in Korea has diverse patterns of coalition (mainly ad hoc) and contest, as indicated by Heery and his colleagues (2012b). This case study also finds that there coexist multiple union-CSO coalitions competing for public leverage, and that the incidence and intensity of cross-movement coalitions could be contradictory, as evinced by the 'broadening networking and lowering cohesiveness' in the

union-CSO coalitions in the recent period of neoliberal regime. Moreover, in contrast to the Western studies, the union-CSO coalitions in Korea have geared at the policy-making and politics at the national level, focusing on the coalition-building at the community level. This might be attributed to the fact that nationwide issues such as democratization and neoliberal restructuring have been the focal agenda to be tackled by labor unions and civil society organizations.

Thirdly, the marginalization of labor unions in the terrain of cross-movement coalitions symbolizes the overlapped crises of internal (organized-unorganized) and external (union-CSO) solidarities, that Korean labor union movement are faced with at present. In order to avoid the fate of old union movement losing social leverage in the Western advanced countries, and revitalize their potential to lead social activism, the visionary horizon of Korean unions need to, as pointed out by the Social Movement Unionism literature, “go beyond self-interested workplace activities to civil politics, embracing the totality of citizen lives as citizens, community constituents, consumers, and family members” (Fairbrother 2008).

(Submitted: July 3, 2015; Accepted: July 14, 2015)

## References

- Abbott, Brian, Edmund Heery, and Stephen Williams. 2012. “Civil Society Organizations and the Exercise of Power in the Employment Relationship.” *Employee Relations* 34(1): 91-107.
- Buechler, Steven. 1995. “New Social Movement Theories.” *Sociological Quarterly* 36(3): 441-464.
- Chang, Sang-Chul. 2003. “Sahoe Byundonggwa Sahoeundong Byunwaha: Nodongundong Chimchewa Siminundongui Sungjang [Social Transformation and Change in Social Movement: Deterioration of Labor Movement and Growth of Civil Movement].” *Sahoebaljunyeongu [Social Development Study]* 9: 85-103.
- Cho, Don-Moon ed. 1996. *Ndongundonggwa Sinsaheoundongui Yeondae: Ironjuk Ihaewa Yeondae Gyunghoem [Solidarity of Labor Movement and New Social Movements: Theoretical Understanding and Experience of Solidarity]*. Seoul: FKTU Research Institute.
- Cho, Hee-Yeon. 1995. *Simin Sahoewa Simin Undong [Civil Society and Civil Movement]*. Seoul: Hanul.
- Craft, James. 1990. “The Community as a Source of Power.” *Journal of Labor Research* 11(2): 145-160.

- Ehrenberg, John. 2002. *Civil Society: the Critical History of an Idea*. New York: New York University Press.
- Eun, Soo-Mi. 2004. "Gangwhadoen Networkgwa Yakwhadoen Yeondae: Sahoeundongui Networkingwa Hankook Sminsahe [Stronger Network, Weaker Solidarity: Networking of Social Movement and Korean Civil Society]." *Minjujuwiwa Ingwon [Democracy and Human Rights]* 4(2): 5-38.
- Fairbrother, Peter. 2008. "Social Movement Unionism or Trade Unions as Social Movements." *Employee Responsibility Rights Journal*, 20: 213-220.
- Freeman, Richard. 2005. "Fighting for Other Folks' Wages: The Logic and Illogic of Living Wage Campaigns." *Industrial Relations* 44(1): 14-31.
- Heery, Edmund, Brian Abbott and Stephen Williams. 2012a. "The Involvement of Civil Society Organizations in British Industrial Relations: Extent, Origins, and Significance." *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 50(1): 47-72.
- Heery, Edmund, Stephen Williams, and Brian Abbott. 2012b. "Civil Society Organizations and Trade Unions: Cooperation, Conflict, Indifference." *Work Employment & Society* 26(1): 145-160.
- Hyman, Richard. 2001. *Understanding European Trade Unionism: Between Market, Class and Society*. London: Sage Publications.
- Kang, In-Soon. 2011. "Chanwonjiyoek Siminundongui Daeduwa Jojikwha: 1987nyun Minjuhangaeng ihu [Organization of Civil Social Movement in Changwon Region: since 1987 Democratization Movement]." *Inmunsonchong [Journal of Human Studies]* 27: 311-358.
- Kang, Soo-Taek. 2012. *Yeondaejuui: Monadismul Numeo [Solidarism: Overcoming the Monadism]*. Seoul: Hangilsa.
- Lee, Byoung-Hoon. 2011a. "Employment Relations in South Korea." in *International & Comparative Employment Relations: Globalization and Change*, edited by Greg Bamber, Russell Lansbury, and Nick Wailes. London: Sage, 281-306.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2011b. "Labor Solidarity in the Era of Neoliberal Globalization." *Development and Society* 40(2): 319-334.
- Lee, Byoung-Hoon and Sang-Hoon Yi. 2012. "Organizational Transformation towards Industry Unionism in South Korea." *Journal of Industrial Relations* 54(4): 476-493.
- Lee, Chul-Seung. 2007. "Labor Unions and Good Governance: a Cross-National Comparative Analysis." *American Sociological Review* 72(4): 585-609.
- Lee, Hee-Soo. 2004. "Segewhasidaee Nodongundongui Gwanjumeseo Barabon Siminundongui Daejungsung [Popularity of Civil Society Movement viewed from the Perspective of Labor Movement in the Era of Globalization]." *Gioekgwa Joenmang [Memory and Prospect]* 8: 58-67.
- Müller-Jentsch, Walther. 1991. "Productive Forces and Industrial Citizenship: an Evolutionary Perspective on Labor Relations." *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 12: 439-467.
- Offe, Claus. 1985. "New Social Movements: Challenging the Boundaries of

- Institutional Politics.” *Social Research* 52(4): 817-868.
- Park, Won-Seok. 1998. “Nodongundonggwa Siminundongui Saeroun Yeondaegwangye Monsaek [New Approach toward Solidarity between Labor Movement and Civil Movement].” *Nondong Sahoe [Labor Society Bulletin]* 21: 28-33.
- Pichardo, Nelson. 1997. “New Social Movements: a Critical Review.” *Annual Review of Sociology* 23: 411-430.
- Suzuki, Akira. 2008. “Community Unions in Japan: Similarities and Differences of Region-based Labor Movements between Japan and Other Industrialized Countries.” *Economic and Industrial Democracy* 29(4): 492-520.
- Tarrow, Sidney. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tattersall, Amanda and David Reynolds. 2007. “The Shifting Power of Labor-Community Coalitions: Identifying Common Elements of Powerful Coalitions in Australia and the U.S.” *Working USA* 10 (1): 77-102.
- Urry, John. 1983. *The Anatomy of Capitalist Societies: the Economy, Civil Society and the State*. London: MacMillan Press.

**BYOUNG-HOON LEE** is Professor at the Department of Sociology, Chung-Ang University in South Korea. His main research areas are labor union movements, labor market segmentation/polarization, and non-regular labor issues. He has co-edited a special volume of the *Journal of Industrial Relations*, *Varieties of Labor Movement in Asia-Pacific Region* (2012), and authored a number of papers and book chapters on the transformation of labor union movements and labor markets in Korea. *Address*: Department of Sociology, Chung-Ang University, Heuksuk-ro 84, Dongjak-gu, 156-756, Seoul, South Korea. [*E-mail*: bhlee@cau.ac.kr]