

EAI COLUMN

June 10, 2015
ISBN 979-11-86226-37-7
95340

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Acknowledgement
This column is was originally published in Korean by *Dong-a Ilbo* on June 2, 2015 and can be found [here](#).

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South Korea Should Take Measures to Support Democracy

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June is the month that saw South Korea's pro-democracy movement ignited. South Korea was able to establish a democratic government at the end of a long struggle in a difficult setting filled with poverty, division, and cold war tensions. Although one can level criticisms against the current state of South Korea's democracy, we should be proud of our success story given that the country's democratic transition in 1987 has paved new inroads toward democratic consolidation.

Despite this success, South Korea is occasionally asked by international figures why it does not take more active measures to safeguard and disseminate democracy abroad. While South Korea is active in informing and spreading knowledge abroad about its own economic development process, it is very passive regarding its experience with democratization. Beneath the surface there seems to be a recognition that, just as South Korea's struggle for democracy was sparked internally and progressed without assistance from other countries, other nations should also bring about democracy on their own. This could also be due to the fact that South Korean pride in our democracy is not as adamant as it is for our economic development. When providing aid to developing countries, unlike many Western states, South Korea tends not to make overt demands regarding human rights or the rule of law. Instead economic development is put first, and although there may be talk of

supporting good governance, this effort does not go beyond strengthening governmental capacity. South Korea is too concerned with creating friction with the government in the recipient country to outright support civil society organizations.

Currently, democracy is facing crises all around the world. The number of electoral democracies, which are characterized by their implementation of free and open elections, had risen through 2005 but has now stagnated at 62%, and the number of liberal democracies which respect the civil rights and freedoms of their citizens is hovering at 45%. Looking at the *Freedom in the World* report prepared by Freedom House, there has not been an increase in the level of freedom over the last ten years and the number of countries in which democracy is in peril is increasing. The democratic fervor started by the Jasmine Revolution and Arab Spring disappeared in a flash and in its wake confusion and distress linger. An authoritarian government has returned in Egypt and Syria is engulfed in a seemingly never-ending civil war. Ukraine saw the Crimean Peninsula annexed by Russia. Club de Madrid, which is a forum of former democratic presidents and prime ministers, pointed out that the current democratic crisis is not limited to developing countries, but is also being faced by consolidated democracies as well. With the recent economic crises and the rise in unemployment, developed democratic nations face various challenges

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and these economic and political hardships are causing the support for democracy in the developing world to wither.

When it comes to internal challenges, South Korea is no exception. Problems abound from constant ideological standoff between conservatives and progressives, collective selfishness that demands rights but shy away from responsibility, and expedient and illegal practices that threatens the rule of law. But should these stop from South Korea to play a more active role in supporting the struggling global democracy movement? Democracy is not always the most virtuous or beautiful system, but there is no better way to protect human rights and liberties. Democracy is also effective at delivering people from poverty as it provides the benefits of development to the majority and valuable in that it promotes peaceful solutions rather than force during conflicts, thus contributing to international peace. South Korea should certainly endeavor to deepen the roots of democracy around the world. There is no perfect democracy. The so-called developed democracies deal with their own internal issues and at the same time support democratization abroad. However, many developing countries find such support, which is mainly provided by the West, to be alien and meddlesome while tending to be more favorable towards support from South Korea, a country itself that overcame poverty and oppression to achieve democracy. Yet South Korea has not engaged in any full-scale discussion regarding how we should support democracy, who should be targeted, or what principles and norms should be applied. There is not even a suitable governmental organization that could provide worthwhile leadership in efforts to support democracy promotion.

Former U.S. President Ronald Reagan

wanted to unify an America divided by the Vietnam War and implement a foreign policy based on safeguarding and proliferating democracy. To this end, he helped establish a private foundation called the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) with the support of Congress in 1983. The President of NED, Carl Gershman, has urged South Korea, which he views as the exemplary model of democracy in Asia, to create an organization for supporting democracy internationally with support from the National Assembly. In November, NED will host the Eighth World Movement for Democracy (WMD) in Seoul, which will mark its second event in Asia. South Korea should take this opportunity to earnestly consider issues dealing with the support of democracy, a world that is faced with unstable democratic systems, and the agony caused by oppression from authoritarian regimes such as in North Korea. It is now time for South Korea to disseminate to the world the democracy it achieved through a fierce struggle many Junes ago. ■

— Sook-Jong Lee is the EAI President, and a professor at Sungkyunkwan University. Currently, Dr. Lee holds advisory positions in the South Korean government, including the Presidential National Security Advisory Group, Presidential Committee for Unification Preparation and councils for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Unification, and the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA). She also participates as member of the Trilateral Commission, Council of Councils, and many other transnational networks on research and policy studies. Dr. Lee received her B.A. from Yonsei University, and M.A. and Ph.D. in sociology from Harvard University.