THE EXPLOSION OF CSOs AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION:
An Assessment of
Civil Society in South Korea 2004

CIVICUS CIVIL SOCIETY INDEX REPORT FOR SOUTH KOREA

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CIVICUS Civil Society Index
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The CIVICUS Civil Society Index (CSI) uses 74 indicators to measure the state of civil society. These indicators are grouped together into four overall dimensions, and their scores on the scale of 0 to 3 are shown in the Civil Society Diamond for South Korea (figure 1) representing the current state of civil society in South Korea. In short, the current state of South Korean civil society is characterised by an imbalance among four dimensions. The scores for values and impact dimensions are moderate, while those for structure and environment reveal relatively weak levels of development.

![South Korean Civil Society Diamond](https://example.com/diamond.png)

Civil society’s strengths are a consequence of the fact that, over the past two decades, Korean civil society organisations (CSOs) have focused their time and energy on advocacy activities, such as holding the state and business sector accountable and transparency. Korean CSOs have tended to utilise 'nationwide solidarity' strategies of agenda setting and political mobilisation, which have been extremely effective and efficient so that advocacy CSOs were for some time the most trusted institutions among all major public and social institutions in South Korea. Their activities were also widely covered in major newspapers and TV stations. 'Nationwide solidarity' movements depended heavily on direct actions, such as campaigning, petitions, boycotting and demonstrations. These were successful since they united hundreds of CSOs to advocate on social and political issues.

For last two decades, South Korean civil society has been undergoing a comprehensive process of dynamic development. Particularly the last decade saw an explosion of civil society organisations (CSOs) and their growing political impact (Han and Song, 2004; Ha, 2001). Assisted by the spread of the Internet, the influence of not only organised CSOs but also ordinary unorganised citizens on public opinion and political processes has increased dramatically. However, as the CSI study shows, it seems that the explosion of citizen participation during the last decade has contributed neither to improving the environment of civil society, nor to the
structural development of CSOs and their impacts on socio-cultural transformation. In particular, the socio-cultural environment (e.g. tolerance, trust), legal environment, and relationship between civil society and private sector are still not conducive to activities of CSOs. Even though citizens are increasingly active in non-partisan political action, volunteering and giving, the resources of the CSOs remain limited.

The **structure** dimension examines the make-up of civil society, in terms of the main characteristics of individual and associational participation and the relationships among civil society participants. The findings reveal that the structure of South Korean civil society is of limited strength and scope. The most critical weaknesses constitute the lack of adequate financial and human resources, followed by the limited depth of citizen participation and limited leader diversity within CSOs. However, civil society’s overall level of organisation and interrelations as well as the breadth of citizen participation are quite strong. For example, both the reach and effectiveness of umbrella organisation or solidarity networks among CSOs were assessed as quite positive. Regarding the extent of citizen participation, the following forms show rather high percentage of citizen involvement: non-partisan political action, CSO membership and volunteering. However, a closer look at CSO membership reveals that it is concentrated on recreational associations, which are not likely to contribute to strengthening the public sphere where people come together to discuss social issues. The vibrancy of citizen participation in South Korea is therefore not so much driven by organisational membership, but rather by common political actions and widespread volunteering, which seems to reflect the segregation of advocacy-oriented and service-oriented activities in South Korean civil society.

The **environment** dimension considers how enabling the external environment is for civil society and examines political, social, cultural, economic and legal factors as well as the attitudes and behaviour of state and business actors towards civil society. Among the seven subdimensions, the legal and socio-cultural contexts in South Korea are the most unfavourable for civil society. The legal context is a rather disabling, as election and national security laws restrict advocacy activities and tax laws limit the benefits of tax exemption and fundraising activities. Low levels of trust, tolerance and public spiritedness (socio-cultural norms) also pose a hindrance to the development of South Korean civil society.

The **values** dimension received the highest score among the four dimensions and reflects that South Korean civil society practices and promotes positive values to a significant extent. In particular, the promotion of values, such as environmental sustainability, transparency and gender equality are recognised as accomplishments of South Korean civil society. However, the role of civil society in promoting the values of tolerance and non-violence is rather limited.

The **impact** dimension shows a rather healthy state of South Korean civil society. The sector’s role in influencing public policies is remarkably well developed. Showing the highest score among the subdimensions of impact, civil society’s public policy impact covers five policy fields (i.e. political reform, environmental protection, anti-corruption, gender equity, human rights protection), while only the field of social welfare received a lower rating. However, South Korean civil society has been not active in meeting societal needs directly, building social capital, and educating/informing citizens. While civil society is strong in holding the state accountable, its efforts towards the private sector receive only a moderately positive result. This
difference seems to reflect the fact that the political democratisation has so far not been accompanied by a similar process in the economy.

Thus, the CSI shows that the improvements of the state of civil society should focus on strategies to strengthen the structure of civil society and the environment in which it exists. Civil society leaders and external stakeholders unanimously suggested the government play a more active role in these efforts. Above all, the government should amend certain regulatory laws, including: the “Contribution Collection Law” and the “NPO Supporting Law”, so that CSOs can become financially stable and sustainable with increased support from the government as well as citizens.

Another suggestion concerned the role of citizens in supporting efforts to strengthen CSOs. A major problem is that the current growth of citizen participation does not appear to contribute to the structural development of CSOs, but focuses on once-off individual activities. Also, the depth of citizen contributions through charitable giving, volunteering and membership activities for public-benefit organisations remains still marginal.

As citizens begin to emerge as the heart of democracy in South Korea, the long-term development of South Korean civil society needs to keep pace with the rising contributions of ordinary citizens, which will help CSOs to achieve financial and political independence from government and business. A variety of forms of citizen participation, including a recent series of "candlelight” demonstrations and online advocacy activities, rapidly became 'conventional' in South Korea. Online netizens are becoming important agents of formulating public opinion and setting public agendas and a wide variety of their networks begin to play significant roles in South Korean civil society. Active citizens with Internet connections are becoming the building blocks of a new civil society of “Dynamic Korea,” a symbol of the national brand power of South Korea. One of the main challenges for South Korean civil society is connecting these explosive, but highly fluctuating forms of citizen participation with continuous, stable citizen organisations.