

# The Asian Solidarity Movement in Korean Civil Society: Observations on Thirty Years of Development

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“Asian solidarity movement” has been a catchphrase for the international activities of Korean civil society for three decades. The activism of Korean civil society started to become tangible in the early 1990s, mainly because of Korea’s democratization and globalization. This article begins by describing the origin, growth, and diversification of this solidarity movement. It then emphasizes recent changes that can be observed in two key areas, namely, issues and participation. Unlike in earlier phases of the movement, when activists focused mainly on issues directly relevant to Korea, today’s activism is more concerned with universal values. It also attracts citizens beyond activists and intellectuals.

**Keywords:** labor, migration, Korea, East Timor, Burma/Myanmar, Southeast Asia, ODA, Indonesia

Over the past thirty years, “Asian solidarity movement” has been a catchphrase for the international activities of Korean civil society. In the early 1990s, Korean civil society became aware of and concerned with intervening in issues faced by other Asian people. Later, in the early 2000s, Korean civil society tried to define its activities with respect to Asian issues under the umbrella of Asiayeondaeundong (Asian solidarity movement). This study illustrates how the Asian solidarity movement has changed over three decades. A discussion of the background of this movement as well as its growth and diversification is followed by an analysis of recent developments within the movement.

Considering the Asian solidarity movement’s three-decade history, there have been surprisingly few academic publications on it. The outcome of the first comprehensive examination of the movement was the 2006 *Dong-Asia Yeondae Undong Danche Baekseo* (2006 East Asian Solidarity Movement Almanac), published by Seonam Forum—

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a group of scholars supported by the Seonam Foundation, a nonprofit organization based in Seoul. This book describes and evaluates the development of the solidarity movement from the 1990s to the early 2000s. Notably, it includes Southeast Asia within East Asia, moving away from the exclusive synonymy of East Asia with Northeast Asia. In 2015 Youngmi Yang, an experienced activist in the Asian solidarity movement, wrote a book chapter describing the diverse activities of various sectors within the movement and presented her reflections on the movement with a focus on its limitations.<sup>1)</sup>

The most recent evaluation of the movement is a research report in Korean published by Jeonbuk National University Institute for Southeast Asian Studies in collaboration with scholars and activists (Jeon 2021).<sup>2)</sup> The 270-page report contains the history of the Asian solidarity movement, including special chapters on solidarity movements in the health and migrant labor sectors, case study chapters on major organizations, and a list of Asian solidarity movement organizations. Building on the conclusions of the report, this article summarizes the historical dynamics of the Asian solidarity movement as it spread to various sectors and analyzes recent changes within the movement. It demonstrates that the movement has entered a new phase, particularly after the Myanmar crisis since May 2021.

## The Beginnings of the Asian Solidarity Movement

The Asian solidarity movement emerged in the early 1990s, when civil society was developing rapidly in Korea along with the country's democratization after the June 1987 protests. Workers and farmers organized nationwide, and new issue-based movements emerged to address various areas of concern, such as the environment, peace, women, and human rights. The term "nongovernmental organization" (NGO) came into use and quickly became commonplace. A total of 4,023 organizations in Korea considered themselves NGOs in 2000, of which 77.5 percent had been established in the 1980s and 1990s (Cho 2003, Ch. 5). They included Gyeongsilyeon (Citizens' Coalition for Economic Justice; CCEJ), founded in 1989, and Chamyeoyeondae (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy; PSPD), founded in 1994.

These emerging organizations became the main actors in the international solidarity

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1) We can find several papers focusing on specific themes within the movement, such as Asian women workers' solidarity (Park 2008), the utility of information and communications technology (Jeon 2008), the role of Burmese refugees in Korea (Suh 2015), Myanmar student activism in Korea (Lee 2022), solidarity education for Myanmar (An 2021), and the "Sorry, Vietnam" campaign of Koreans (Yoon 2018).

2) The report is available for free download in Jeon (2021).

movement, which differentiated itself from old patterns in Korea. In the past—after the Korean War and during the ensuing authoritarian era—international solidarity activities in Korea meant getting help from European and American civic groups or international organizations to solve domestic problems related to human rights, poverty, etc. However, after democratization, Korean civil society did not seek unilateral assistance from abroad; instead, it sought to reciprocally provide and receive help.

In 1989, the year after the Seoul Olympics, the Korean government liberalized overseas travel for Koreans; and in 1992, conditions for overseas travel such as the completion of anticommunist education were also abolished. This liberalization created an environment that increased the potential for face-to-face international activities by Korean NGOs. After Korea's entry into the United Nations in 1991, Korean activists were invited to participate in international conferences sponsored by the UN. This allowed Korean NGOs to assume an international and regional role. International conferences served as opportunities for Korean NGOs to appreciate the importance of international involvement and to strengthen their international networks.<sup>3)</sup>

Before the 1990s, Korean NGOs were not involved in helping people in developing countries in Asia. However, in the early 1990s the movement to help fellow Asians began. The first initiatives were advocacy activities for Asian workers in Korean companies, both within Korea and abroad. From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, large numbers of Asian foreign workers began to flow into Korea. Many of these workers had to toil in jobs that were deemed difficult, dirty, and dangerous (or “3D”), and they faced the harsh realities of overexploitation and violence (Seol 2003). In response to this problem, NGOs were founded to shelter and advocate for migrant workers in major industrial areas from the early 1990s.<sup>4)</sup> The 13 Nepalese workers' sit-in protest at Myeongdong Cathedral in January 1995 (Han 2015) led to the formation of Oeigukinijunodongundonghyupeihoi, or Oeinohyup (Joint Committee for Migrant Workers in Korea). Thirty-seven organizations concerned with foreign workers in various industrial cities established this national network for strengthening and coordinating their advocacy activities (Jeon 2003). Later, Oeinohyup became a member of the

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3) For example, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 provided important momentum for Korean environmental groups, and the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna in 1993 was a crucial opportunity for human rights groups in Korea. The interview with Youngmi Yang, ex-chairwoman of the International Solidarity Committee in PSPD, was conducted in May 2020.

4) According to Dr. Joo-young Kim, using various sources, as of 2020 at least 153 organizations were actively serving foreign workers in Korea. Only three of these organizations were established in the late 1980s; approximately 20 percent were founded in the 1990s and 40 percent in the 2000s (Jeon 2021, Ch. 3).

## Migrant Forum in Asia.

In 1995 Chamyeyeondae (People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy; PSPD), the biggest advocacy NGO in Korea, started monitoring the overseas operations of Korean companies. Democratization led to massive labor strikes and an independent national union in Korea. Korean companies began moving their factories overseas—mainly to Indonesia, Vietnam, and China—to avoid militant workers and rising wages. In 1995, PSPD sent its first monitoring team to Indonesia to investigate human rights violations in Korean companies that were in conflict with local workers.<sup>5)</sup> PSPD again sent teams to Indonesia in 1996 and 1998. It sent its first fact-finding team to Vietnam and China in 1998. In 2000, this monitoring of human rights violations in overseas Korean companies led to the establishment of Kukjeminjuyeondae (Korean House for International Solidarity), which specialized in monitoring activities. Kukjeminjuyeondae's monitoring began to cover new areas such as India, Cambodia, and Burma/Myanmar (Jeon 2021, Ch. 5).

While labor rights in Korean companies were related directly to Korea, other issues not directly related to Korea had emerged. The Santa Cruz Massacre in East Timor, committed by the Indonesian military in 1991, attracted global attention thanks to the post-Cold War situation and aroused the sympathy of Korean human rights activists, especially Korean Catholics. On November 12, 1996, the fifth anniversary of the massacre, Minbyun (Lawyers for a Democratic Society), Sarangbang (a human rights movement organization), and individuals from the Catholic Church set up the Dongtimoryeondaemoim (East Timor Solidarity Group) network to support the East Timor independence movement (Sarangbang 1996; Ohmynews 2002).

This network is the first in Korea to have been formed solely for the improvement of human rights in a low-income country. It invited East Timor Foreign-Minister-in-Exile José Ramos Horta for public talks, organized protests in front of the Indonesian Embassy in Seoul, held fundraising activities, published reports, distributed documentary films, and participated in the Asia Pacific Coalition for East Timor. The group remained active until East Timor became independent in 2002. In addition to this group's activities, the May 18 Foundation, established to commemorate the 1980 Gwangju Uprising, awarded the first Gwangju Human Rights Award to Xanana Gusmao, the leader of the East Timorese independence movement, in 2000. This solidarity activism for East Timor was one of the three major pioneering activities launched by Korean NGOs for the Asian solidarity movement along with advocacy for migrant workers' rights and monitoring of overseas Korean companies.

Economic crises and regional cooperation from the late 1990s forced Korea's Asian

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5) The major findings were published in two journal articles (Shin and Lee 1995; Shin 2011). The history of the activities was recorded on the PSPD website (PSPD 2014a).

solidarity movement to look into Southeast Asia more seriously. The 1997 Asian economic crisis, which began in Thailand and extended to Indonesia as well as South Korea, evoked a sense of a common fate between Koreans and Southeast Asians. This provided momentum for Korean labor unions to join the Asian solidarity movement. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which was focused on relationships with Europe, Brazil, and South Africa, became more active in establishing networks with labor unions and NGOs in Southeast Asia.<sup>6)</sup> KCTU sent its first field-research team to Southeast Asia—Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines—to survey the conditions of labor unions (KCTU 2003) and participated in the Asian Transnational Corporations Monitoring Network, which was interested in labor rights.

The acceleration of East Asian regional cooperation initiated by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations after the 1997 economic crisis also indirectly contributed to broadening the interest of Korean activists in Southeast Asia. At the thirtieth anniversary celebration of its founding, ASEAN invited the heads of government of Korea, China, and Japan; and one year later it launched the ASEAN Plus Three (APT) Summit. South Korea's liberal president Kim Dae-Jung said that he felt keenly aware of Korea's fateful ties with Southeast Asia after participating in the APT Summit (Lee 2007).

As the Korean government was invited to ASEAN-centered meetings, Korea's relationship with ASEAN and its members was mentioned more frequently in the Korean media, and exchanges in the private sector between Korea and ASEAN also increased accordingly. ASEAN and its civil society were experimenting with "participatory regionalism" (Acharya 2003), and some Korean activists and intellectuals felt that this energy had the potential to enhance the people-centered "East Asian Community" (Jeon 2007). This congenial atmosphere contributed to spreading the idea that Southeast Asian partners were more important than other Asian partners for Korea's Asian solidarity movement.

### **Broadening and Deepening of Solidarity: New Issues and Actors**

Since the 2000s, the Asian solidarity movement in Korean civil society has diversified to include a variety of sectors and actors. Entering the 2000s, a series of discussions were held within PSPD to look back on international solidarity activities and set a new direction. The International Solidarity Committee of PSPD discussed what slogans would best represent the orientation of the "Asian solidarity movement." The slogans "*Uri*

6) Interview with Yongmo Yoon, ex-international officer in KCTU and researcher in the Korean Labor Society Institute, September 2006.

*Sogei Asia*” (Asia in us: Asia in Korea) and “*Asia Sogei Uri*” (We in Asia: Korea in Asia) were proposed. The former represented human rights advocacy for Asian migrants in Korea, from workers’ rights to marriage migrants’ and refugees’ rights. The latter represented the monitoring of Korean activities in Asia—first Korean companies and later Korean official development assistance (ODA). As the chairperson of the committee at the time, I asked to add the value-oriented slogan “*Uriga Kumkuneun Asia*” (Asia we dream of), and later the committee transformed the slogan to “*Uriga Mandenun Asia*” (Asia we make) (PSPD 2014a). This meant that Koreans should think about and practice the values to pursue in Asia. Solidarity for East Timor’s independence was the best example of a value-oriented activity from Korean NGOs. This type of solidarity was later adopted in Korea in the 2000s to support democracy in Burma.

*“Asia in Korea”: Changing Focus to Asian Migrants in General*

The changing patterns of migration inflow to Korea affected the development of the Asian solidarity movement. Beginning in the 2000s, the increasing number of marriage migrants from Asian nations raised problems of social integration and human rights. In 2021, according to the Korean Statistical Information Service, marriage immigrants numbered more than 160,000. The places of origin were, in descending order, China, Vietnam, Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, and Cambodia. Women accounted for 80 percent (KOSIS n.d.). To respond to this new pattern of migration, the advocacy movement for Asian migrants (the “Asia in Korea” category) expanded to encompass the issue of Asian marriage migrants in Korea.

Ijuyeoseonginkweonsenteo (Women Migrants Human Rights Center) was established in 2001 and spread its branches at the provincial level. Ten years later, organizations concerned with women migrants had been established in almost every county. This organizational achievement could be realized partly due to the transformation of the existing organizations for migrant workers into organizations for migrants in general. The Korean government also established as many as 218 Multicultural Family Support Centers nationwide to help with the social integration of transnational-marriage families by providing programs such as counseling, occupational training, Korean language instruction, interpretation, and translation services. Many centers employed ex-activists who had previously worked at NGOs dealing with migrants’ rights. These ex-activists were able to help marriage migrants connect with government assistance.

Refugee rights advocacy in Korea began in earnest in 2000. The initial momentum came from the collective application for refugee status by Burmese migrants in Korea. The Korean government ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention in 1992. However, no one in Korea was recognized as a refugee in March 2000 when a Burmese migrant, Kyaw Swa

Linn, carrying out support activities for Burma's democratization applied for asylum. The Korean government did not accept the migrant and instead decided to deport him. In response to this unprecedented situation, 14 human rights organizations led by Minbyun issued a statement opposing the Korean government's decision and started to conduct public campaigns together with Burmese migrants. They prevented the government from deporting Swa Linn. Soon after, twenty other Burmese migrants registered asylum claims. Three of the Burmese asylum seekers obtained refugee status in January 2003 and four more in 2005 (Suh 2015, 763–765).

*“Korea in Asia”: Extending Engagement to Peace, Environment, and Development*

“Korea in Asia” activities, which encompassed the responsibility of Koreans for their behavior in Asia, extended to issues concerning the Vietnam War (1955–75). From September 1964 to March 1973, 325,517 South Korean soldiers served in the war. A Korean student studying in Vietnam wrote a widely read news article on victims' testimonies of the civilian massacre committed by Korean soldiers during the Vietnam War (Koo 1999). This was the spark that started the “Sorry Vietnam” campaign. The campaign, which developed in numerous ways, included peace tours, fact-finding investigations, peace education, medical volunteerism, people's tribunals, advocacy for victims, scholarships, and the operation of a peace museum.<sup>7)</sup> The campaign led to the establishment in 2016 of Hanvpeyeonghwajaedan (Korea-Vietnam Peace Foundation) as an organization dedicated to the pursuit of Asian and international peace. Nguyễn Thị Thanh, one of the victims of the Phong Nhi Phong Nhut village massacre, filed a lawsuit against the Republic of Korea government in April 2020. She won the case in the first trial and obtained a historic judgment for compensation in Korea (*Hankook Ilbo* 2023).

In the meantime, the Korean environmental movement started to extend its interest to Southeast Asia in the late 1990s. For example, Hwangyungundongyeonhap (Korean Federation for Environmental Movements; KFEM), which focused on Northeast Asia and carried out initiatives such as the creation of an information-sharing website for Japan and China (Jeon 2008), sent the first research team to Indonesia in 1998 to assess the haze problem and the protection of tropical rainforest. It has been monitoring environmental destruction caused by Korean companies in Asia for two decades. As KFEM served as the Korean branch of Friends of the Earth, it was possible for it to connect with environmental movements in almost all countries in Asia through its network.

In the mid-2000s, Korean NGOs initiated monitoring activities for Korean ODA

7) Korean dentists and medical doctors who organized Vietnampyeonghwaeiryoeyondae (Vietnam Peace Medical Solidarity) visited the victims' villages in Vietnam and performed medical volunteer work every year from 2000 to 2019 (Jeon 2021, Ch. 7).



for the first time. “ODA monitoring” was a new term in Korean civil society. The Korean government started to provide ODA—with a priority on serving Asian countries—after the establishment of the Korea International Cooperation Agency in 1991. It increased its volume of ODA after joining the OECD in 1996, particularly in response to affiliation with the OECD Development Assistance Committee in 2010. Korean development NGOs participated in ODA as minor actors, though their number has increased rapidly since the 2000s. The Korea NGO Council for Overseas Development Cooperation was established in 1999, and the number of members increased from 39 in 2005 to 140 in 2021. Many of the above organizations conduct their activities in Asia, especially in Southeast Asia.<sup>8)</sup> Besides development NGOs, advocacy NGOs such as CCEJ and PSPD along with other NGOs concerned with the environment and human rights launched ODA monitoring activities in the mid-2000s (Kim 2013). They followed coordinated pathways to organize the Global Call to Action Against Poverty in Korea in 2005 and Korea Civil Society Forum on International Development Cooperation in 2010. The main demands of these ODA monitoring groups have been to overcome the fragmentation of Korean aid and increase its transparency and accountability (PSPD 2014b).

*“Asia We Make”: Democratic Asia Against State Violence*

In parallel with that development, Asian election monitoring activities were conducted to encourage more universal values in the spirit of “Asia we make.” PSPD dispatched an election monitoring team to Indonesia during the 1999 general election, which was the first such intervention in the history of Korean civil society. Subsequently, PSPD, along with the Asian Network for Free Elections in Bangkok, dispatched its observers to elections in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar (Jeon 2021, Ch. 1).

Advocacy for Burmese refugees in Korea evolved into activities against Burmese military rule (Seonam Forum 2006, Ch. 2). In September 2004 as many as 45 NGOs in Korea issued a joint statement criticizing Burmese military rule and supporting the pro-democracy movement in Burma (PSPD 2004), and later they formed a network named Solidarity for Burmese Democratization.<sup>9)</sup> The majority of participants were migrant workers’ rights advocacy groups, including Burmese migrant communities. In this way, migrant activism provided an important stimulus to motivate the solidarity movement for Burmese democratization in 2000s Korea. Korean NGOs together with Burmese

8) Dahye Kim, a JISEAS researcher, found 68 Korean NGOs participating in activities to aid Southeast Asia in the health and medical fields as of March 2021 (Jeon 2021, 78–80).

9) A statement in 2007 condemning military violence toward peaceful protesters in Myanmar was signed by representatives from 56 organizations (PSPD 2007).



migrants conducted anti-military campaigns through public lectures, the publication of books and reports, and the holding of protest rallies in front of the Embassy of Myanmar in Seoul.<sup>10)</sup> The Burmese democratization campaign in Korea, which lasted almost a decade, involved complex issues such as advocating for Burmese refugee rights, criticizing state violence against peaceful protests, exposing human rights violations and the illegal arms trade by Korean companies, monitoring elections, and providing emergency aid for cyclone victims, long-term aid for refugee camps, and humanitarian aid for Rohingya (Yang 2022).

As a result of such experiences, the solidarity movement deepened and grew more committed. For example, irregular and one-time encounters, such as one-off conferences, are no longer enough for Korean activists concerned about Asian solidarity. Activists have worked to overcome such limitations in various ways (Jeon 2008). From the early 2000s, a variety of new initiatives for encouraging Asian solidarity were presented by the international program of the May 18 Memorial Foundation in Gwangju. The foundation is a nonprofit organization that was set up through donations from victims of state violence and further funded by the Korean government. The foundation's major programs include the Gwangju Prize for Human Rights (since 2000); the Exchange Program of International Interns (since 2001); the Gwangju International Peace Forum, currently the Gwangju Democracy Forum (since 2004); the Gwangju Asian Human Rights Folk School (since 2004); the Solidarity Program for Asian Democracy Movement, which provides financial support for Asian NGOs (since 2005); and scholarships for Asian activists to support their master's program.

### *Emerging Actors and Networks*

Although Asian solidarity movements in Korea were increasing in number and becoming more active, there were few Korean NGO activists working for Asian solidarity. According to a survey conducted by Seonam Forum in 2006, 73 percent of the international officers in NGOs remarked on the lack of human resources available for Asian solidarity work. Most NGOs had only one international program officer. The activists surveyed pointed to a lack of funds, low interest from the mass media, underdevelopment in Asian studies, and ethnocentrism among Koreans as their major obstacles (Seonam Forum 2006; Jeon 2011).

However, new actors stepped in to fill vital vacancies. Asian migrants to Korea became new agents for the movement. In 2003, a rock and roll band—Stop Crackdown—was

10) PSPD set up the special website "Burma and Us" and continuously updated it with basic knowledge and campaign news. It was a meaningful experiment; however, the site no longer exists. For an official analysis of the activities, see PSPD (2014c.).

formed by Asian migrant workers: a Nepalese vocalist, an Indonesian keyboard player, and two guitarists and a drummer from Burma/Myanmar. They actively participated in mass rallies and performed their songs of resistance. The band showed that migrants had voices: they were subjects, not objects. Like the band, many other Asian migrants participated in and even stood at the forefront of solidarity movements. Burmese migrant workers organized the Korean branch of the National League for Democracy and led many protests in front of the Embassy of Myanmar alongside Korean supporters. They became an integral part of Korean NGOs' activism for Burma's democratization. In addition, Burmese migrants' long struggle to apply for refugee status allowed Koreans to learn about the deficiencies of their country's refugee recognition system, despite Korea being a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (Suh 2015). Marriage migrant women were the objects of education and counseling services at first, but as they got used to the Korean language and way of life, some of them became the subjects at Multicultural Family Support Centers to provide education and other social services to other migrants.

It is important to note that public interest lawyers emerged as new actors in the movement. Gonggam, the first organization of public interest lawyers, was formed in 2004. It has advocated for various minority groups, including migrants and refugees in Korea. APLI (Advocates for Public Interest Law) was established in 2011 and participated in the Asian solidarity movement (Shin 2022). Public interest lawyers from the ADI (Asian Dignity Initiative) have been actively engaged in litigating the Rohingya crisis since 2016. As of March 2021, there were 135 public interest lawyers active in various fields in Korea (Jodeak 2021), some of them participating in the Asian solidarity movement and contributing through legal aid, field investigations, and legislative petitions. Their commitment and legal knowledge about human rights were very helpful in supplementing the solidarity movement's human resources.

Korean activists working in Asian umbrella organizations—such as Forum-Asia (Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development) and the Committee for Asian Women in Bangkok along with the Asia Monitor Resource Centre and Asian Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong—also became new agents for fostering Asian solidarity in Korea. The activists shared ideas, information, and networks that they had developed for the mutual benefit of all concerned. Not only on an individual level but also on an organizational level, Korean and Asian civil society networks grew more connected. Korean NGOs developed a more visible solidarity movement internationally by joining transnational networks in Asia,<sup>11)</sup> becoming branches of such networks, or even forming

11) The major networks are Forum-Asia, Asian Network for Free Elections, and Asian NGO Network on National Human Rights Institutions in Bangkok; Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development in Chiang Mai; and Reality of Aid and Asia Pacific Refugee Rights Network in Manila.

international networks originating in Korea. For example, the Asia Democracy Network, launched in Seoul in 2013, encompasses more than three hundred Asian NGOs. Also in 2013, the Asia Development Alliance was founded in Bangkok and developed into a network organization covering thirty groups in twenty Asian countries, with its secretariat located in Seoul.<sup>12)</sup>

## A New Stage of the Movement

The spread of democracy and the improvement of human rights in the region, like the “great transition” in Indonesia, gave Korean activists a sense of accomplishment and pride in their work toward achieving Asian solidarity.<sup>13)</sup> However, political changes, from the 2014 coup in Thailand to the 2021 coup in Myanmar, demonstrated the regression of democracy in the region. Hong Kong and Thai citizens protested in a series of mass rallies. Images and reports from the protests were delivered to Korean citizens in real time through various social media channels. Protesters even appealed directly to Korean citizens for support. A Hong Kong protester sang a Korean demonstration song (BBC News Korea 2019). International students, migrants, and refugees from Thailand staged rallies in Seoul demanding that the Thai monarchy be reformed. Young Myanmar students held a rally asking for help in front of the Korean Embassy in Yangon, with picket signs and speeches in Korean (MBC News 2021). Myanmar migrants in Korea stood again at the forefront, asking for solidarity and action from Korea.

The large-scale protests of young people in Hong Kong and Thailand from 2019 to 2020, and the civil disobedience movement in Myanmar after the coup in 2021, awakened Korean activists to remobilize their resources for the Asian solidarity movement. In particular, Myanmar’s military coup on February 1, 2021 generated several unprecedented outcomes in Korean civil society. First, the number of Korean organizations working to intervene in Myanmar’s affairs increased significantly. A few years ago, only 32 NGOs had signed a joint statement condemning the Rohingya massacre (Seong 2018). However, immediately after the 2021 coup, 240 Korean organizations signed a joint statement condemning the Myanmar military (Tha Byae, March 3, 2021). Various social and religious groups issued critical statements, and there was even one signed by 151

12) See the websites of ADN and ADA.

13) The “great transition” unfolded as follows: the collapse of Suharto’s 32-year dictatorship (1998); Indonesia’s first free general elections in 44 years (1999); the East Timor referendum ending 25 years of Indonesian colonial rule (1999); East Timor’s independence from Indonesia (2002); and the Aceh Peace Agreement, which ended the 29-year civil war in Aceh (2005).

scholars of Southeast Asian studies (Eom 2021; *Hankook Ilbo* 2021; Kim 2021).

What was even more surprising was that many citizens and students, beyond civil society activists and scholars, participated in activities to support the Myanmar citizens' resistance. Looking back, it is clear that Korean civil society organizations' Asian solidarity actions had not been carried out with widespread public support and participation. However, the civil disobedience movement by Myanmar citizens against military violence evoked sympathy from ordinary Korean people. The suffering of Myanmar citizens recalled Koreans' memories of military violence and dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. The sympathy led to Koreans supporting solidarity activities with Myanmar citizens. A clear indicator of civic engagement is financial donations. One NGO, Korean Solidarity for Overseas Community Organization, raised over 530 million won (approximately USD 430,000) for Myanmar citizens in 2021 alone (KOCO 2022, 307).

School students also expressed their sympathy for Myanmar citizens. For example, middle school students in Incheon city drew pictures containing messages of solidarity and posted them on social media (An 2021). Female high school students in Changwon city wrote phrases in support of Myanmar citizens in the schoolyard (KBS News 2021). Schoolteachers taught special classes on the current situation and historical context of the Myanmar crisis. International students from Myanmar were often invited to these classes (Lee 2022). Students who heard the story of the resistance expressed a desire to do something to support Myanmar citizens.

Another new phenomenon was that citizens began participating in activism not only in Seoul or migrant-populated areas but also in major cities all over the country. There was no precedent for civic engagement actions in cities across the country in response to human rights situations in foreign countries. The most prominent area that showed support was Gwangju city (Yeosu MBC News 2021). The life-and-death struggle of Myanmar citizens aroused strong sympathy from Gwangju citizens, who shared the memory of the May 18 Gwangju Uprising, citizens' resistance against the coup d'état in 1980. Activists and citizens gathered under the name of Myanmar-Gwangju Solidarity issued twenty statements against Myanmar's military rule over the 22 months from the organization's inauguration in March 2021 and conducted various activities, including demonstrations, exhibitions, concerts, and seminars. They raised 310 million won (USD 251,000) and provided 250 million won to the National Unity Government, labor unions, prisoners' advocates, and internally displaced people in Myanmar. The May 18 Memorial Foundation awarded Cynthia Maung the Gwangju Human Rights Award, and its members visited refugee camps and the Mae Tao Clinic in Mae Sot (a city on the Thailand-Myanmar border) with Korean activists in 2022. The foundation also met with Myanmar's National Unity Government figures and ethnic minority leaders for discussions on the Myanmar

crisis (May 18 Memorial Foundation 2022).

Interestingly, civic actions corresponded with political decisions of the Korean government and political parties. President Moon Jae-in posted a Facebook message supporting democracy in Myanmar. The National Assembly also issued a statement against the coup in Myanmar. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced specific measures, such as suspending military cooperation with Myanmar and extending the stays of Myanmar workers on humanitarian grounds (Song 2021). Local governments also issued statements supporting the democratization of Myanmar and provided special scholarships to international students from Myanmar (Oh 2021). These responses were very unusual because the Korean government, even though it regards democracy as its core value, generally refrains from making critical comments or acting against authoritarianism and human rights violations in foreign countries. It can be assumed that civic solidarity action for Myanmar people led to these unprecedented political statements and decisions from the Korean government.

## Conclusion: More Universal, More Participatory

Democracy and UN membership formed the opportunity structure for Korean NGOs' Asian solidarity movements. Korea's transition to democracy, which began in 1987, resulted in the emergence of civil society in the country. Korea's entry into the United Nations in 1991 served as a chance for this newly emerged civil society to forge its role in international solidarity movements. In the early 1990s, the inflow of Asian immigrants to Korea and the outflow of Korean companies into Asian countries pushed Korean civil society to focus on advocating for Asian labor rights in Korean companies. The Asian solidarity movement began with a sense of responsibility by responding to specific issues related to Korea.

The Asian solidarity movement, although it started in this way, has grown to encompass a much larger range of issues and areas of concern.<sup>14)</sup> As time passed, it also came to embrace issues less related to Korea. Korean civil society started out intending to connect with civil societies in other Asian countries to solve Korea-related problems. However, once connected, civil societies in other Asian countries began asking Korean civil society to act in solidarity to help resolve their problems. In response to this, Korean civil

14) JISEAS compiled a list titled "Korean Civil Society Organizations Engaging in Southeast Asian Issues." It contains information on 61 organizations operating English websites and active in the solidarity movement related to labor, migrant and refugee rights, transnational companies monitoring, environment, democracy, peace, and ODA issues (JISEAS 2021, 244–270).

society developed a broader view of Asian issues encompassing those beyond Korea. Thus, the movement has developed into one that emphasizes the universal values of human rights, democracy, and peace throughout Asia.

Immigrants, who were once the “objects” of solidarity, emerged as “subjects” of the solidarity movement. The participation of public interest lawyers strengthened the solidarity movement’s expertise. Korean civil society actively joined transnational networks in Asia and even contributed to launching transnational networks for Asia. The advancement of information and communications technology and the spread of social networking services contributed—and continue to do so—to the development of the movement in terms of networking, information exchange, joint action, and empathy formation. Recently, the movement has grown to incorporate people beyond activists and intellectuals. The Myanmar military coup of February 2021 was a particularly significant turning point that helped elevate the movement to new heights and enabled it to glimpse new horizons.

Despite its thirty years of development, Korean civil society’s Asian solidarity movement still faces challenges. Lack of human resources and funding are persistent problems. Most organizations have only one activist for international solidarity. Funding is often discrete, being provided on a project-by-project basis. Even though public participation has increased, there is a problem of bias. While Korean citizens sympathize greatly with Myanmar’s civil disobedience movement, their response to the Muslim Rohingya genocide has been muted. They support democratization but are less enthusiastic about accepting refugees. Asian solidarity activists in Korea are interested in the attitudes of the great powers and the United Nations, but they are less efficient about employing ASEAN or East Asian regional cooperation.

That is why the role of scholars of Southeast Asian studies in Korea should be expanded. Over the past thirty years, Southeast Asia area specialists have participated actively in the Asian solidarity movement in Korea by sharing their knowledge and networks.<sup>15)</sup> Although they have served with dedication for a long time, I would like to propose at least two new roles for them. First, scholars should provide knowledge and understanding of ASEAN and its regional cooperation in order to help Asian solidarity activists interact with ASEAN appropriately and effectively. Second, scholars should serve as a bridge between the state and civil society by encouraging Korean governments to invite Asian solidarity activists to various bilateral and multilateral diplomatic dialogue forums and events; in this way, civil society’s hopes and ideas can be reflected in inter-

15) At least ten scholars of Southeast Asian studies—Yoon Hwan Shin, Je Seong Jeon, Nankyung Choi, Eunsook Jung, Eunhong Park, Jaehyeon Lee, Hyungjong Kim, Inwon Hwang, Jinyoung Park, and Bubmo Jung—have participated in PSPD’s activities for Asian solidarity.

governmental cooperation.

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