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EAI Special Report

Fostering Global Democracy and the Role of the Korean National Assembly

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I. Introduction

Democratic nations worldwide are currently facing a myriad of domestic and international challenges (Bartels et al. 2023). On the global stage, the conflicts between the democratic and the authoritarian camps has been intensified, along with the spread of authoritarian regimes. The Democracy Report, issued in 2023 by the Varieties of Democracy Institute, assessed that the global democracy in 2022 had regressed to the level of 1986. Furthermore, this report evaluated the level of democracy in Asia-Pacific regions had more sharply regressed, falling to merely the level of 1978. According to the report, over the past decade, the freedom of the press has receded in 35 countries, government censorship has strengthened in 47 countries, repression of the Civil society by the government has intensified in 37 countries, and the quality of vote has deteriorated in 30 countries. Within democracies themselves, concerns regarding democratic backsliding have heightened

(Graham and Svobik 2020; Grumbach 2023; Svobik et al. 2023). Democratic backsliding appears in various forms, including political polarization, increased populism, spread of fake news through social media, and the erosion of democratic institutions and norms leading to an authoritarianism of the political process (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2019; Orhan 2022).

South Korea's democracy is also not free from such challenges. The emergence of political polarization, voters with a strong partisanship, and the spread of populism raised concerns about the gradual regression of South Korean democracy (Kwon 2023; Shin 2020). Nonetheless, South Korea's democracy still maintains a high level from the perspective of global standards. According to the Democracy Report by the Varieties of Democracy Institute, 32 countries retain a liberal democratic system, with South Korea ranking 28th in the world in 2023. South Korea has firmly established itself as a representative liberal democracy in Asia alongside Japan and Taiwan. With the elevated international stature of South Korean democracy, there is a growing call of South Korea to support vulnerable nascent democratic states within the international society. South Korea's co-hosting of the second Summit for Democracy in March this year with the United States, Costa Rica, the Netherlands, and Zambia, as well as its plans to host the third Summit for Democracy in 2024, are responses to these demands. However, for South Korea's efforts to bolster global democracy to extend beyond one-time events, they must be supported by an institutional framework. From this background, the East Asia Institute (EAI) held two roundtable discussions under the theme of "South Korea's Role in Establishing Democracy and Protecting Electoral Integrity."

II. Milestone 1: Examples of Support from Oversea Organizations for the Advancement of Global Democracy

During the first meeting held in November 2022, experts from National Endowment for Democracy (NED), National Democratic Institute (NDI), Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL) participated and introduced the projects of their respective organizations for the promotion of democracy.

1. National Endowment for Democracy (NED)¹

National Endowment for Democracy (NED) of the United States was established as an independent non-profit foundation in 1983. NED annually receives congressional approval for its expenditures and utilizes the budget allocated through the Department of State to implement over 2,000 grant projects in more than 100 countries. While its activities are sustained by ongoing support from Congress and the White House, the NED Board of Directors independently wields authority over the execution of the allocated budget. NED strives to enhance institutional foundations and procedures to ensure free and fair elections worldwide, establish the rule of law for the consolidation of liberal democracy, protect individual freedoms, and promote social diversity. Serving as a non-governmental organization, NED plays a crucial role in complementing the official endeavors of the U.S. government in democracy promotion. This is due to its ability to continue its operations in

¹ "National Endowment for Democracy". <https://www.ned.org/> accessed October 24, 2023.

the situations where official government-to-government relations may be lacking or where U.S. government involvement may be complicated. Moreover, NED's relatively small size and non-bureaucratic nature allow it to respond swiftly and flexibly to abrupt political change and crises. Its independence is also advantageous when working with groups that may be wary of direct financial support from the U.S. government.

NED's inception stems from bipartisan efforts, jointly by both the Democratic and Republican parties. This became the basis for its activities receiving continuous and broad support from the U.S. congress, irrespective of the political spectrum. NED maintains special relationship with four organizations, which are so called "core grantee": National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI), Solidarity Center, and Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE). Each of these organizations represents the Republican parties, Democratic parties, labor communities and business communities with distinct objectives. NDI and IRI focus on diversity, free and fair elections, CIPE concentrates on free market and economic reforms, and the Solidarity Center strive to promote independent labor unions. NED ensures equitable allocation of grants to maintain balance among these organizations. Through these efforts, NED can integrate bipartisanship into its institutional framework, thereby assuring the U.S. Congress and other stakeholders of NED's commitment to a multifaceted and balanced approach to democracy. Furthermore, NED engages in transparent disclosure of all facets of its operational activities, including grant funding, and undergoes financial audits conducted not only by the U.S. Congress but also by the Department of State and independent bodies.

2. National Democratic Institute (NDI)²

Since its establishment in 1983, NDI has actively operated in more than 150 countries and currently manages a network of more than 50 local offices. NDI secures funding from a diverse pool of more than 160 entities, including the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), NED, U.S. Department of State, and various international development organizations. NDI also receives financial support from individuals who share its mission of promoting democratic values. Since NDI is a non-profit and non-governmental organization, it maintains political neutrality and retains independence from government influence. Although it maintains a loose affiliation with the Democratic Party, NDI refrains from engaging in domestic activities within the United States and does not take any stance on U.S. domestic election. NDI is committed to supporting various initiatives on the global stage, including capacity building for political parties, civil society, and government institutions. They also focus on enhancing governance, promoting free and fair elections, and increasing citizen participation. To achieve these objectives, NDI forges close collaboration with local partners, offering invaluable advice for advancing democracy and assisting them in applying it in ways that are tailored to each country's circumstances and requirements.

² "National Democratic Institute". <https://www.ndi.org/> accessed October 24, 2023.

3. Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL)³

ANFREL, established in 1997, is a non-partisan and independent international organization dedicated to the promotion of democracy within the Asian region. ANFREL is a coalition of civil society organizations that collectively advocate for the establishment of governments through free and fair elections. As of 2023, ANFREL encompasses 28 member organizations hailing from 18 different countries. ANFREL's core activities are structured around three pillars: Election observation, Capacity Building, and Campaign & Advocacy. Election Observation entails the monitoring of electoral processes to ensure compliance with both national legal frameworks and international standards. Since its inaugural election observation mission during the 1998 Cambodian general elections, ANFREL has conducted more than 65 missions across Asia. Furthermore, ANFREL routinely conducts workshops designed to enhance the capabilities of civil society organizations, media outlets, and other stakeholders actively engaged in the pursuit of free and fair elections throughout the Asian region. To support these efforts, ANFREL has also established the Asian Electoral Resource Center. Campaign and advocacy efforts encompass activities aimed at bolstering awareness of election-related issues within the Asian region and enhancing the quality of elections. ANFREL collaborates closely with the NDI and the NED to execute these activities.

In conjunction with succinct overviews of the respective initiatives of NDI and ANFREL, representatives from these organizations have proposed several key considerations

³ "Asian Network for Free Elections". <https://anfrel.org/> accessed October 24, 2023.

pertaining to South Korea's role in advancing democracy. Firstly, it is advisable to integrate democracy promotion initiatives as fundamental principles within comprehensive and long-term plans, such as national security strategies and development agendas, rather than treating them as distinct endeavors. South Korea's rich experience in the evolution of democracy and its attendant lessons can offer valuable insights to emerging democracies currently navigating the democratization process. Hence, an expansion of South Korea's existing development aid programs, aligning them with the promotion of democracy, is a plausible proposition. The implementation of democracy promotion programs can also foster a deeper appreciation of democratic values among the South Korean government and its citizens. Secondly, efforts aimed at supporting democracy should extend beyond intergovernmental relations to encompass the entirety of society, including the legislative branch, civil society, and the media. The promotion of global democracy transcends partisan interests and has the potential to foster bipartisan cooperation. This is exemplified in the United States, where political polarization often impedes cooperation on domestic issues between the Democratic and Republican parties, but not when it comes to supporting global democracy. In this context, the South Korean National Assembly might contemplate fostering dialogue with legislative bodies in neighboring Asian nations through bipartisan endeavors and supporting non-partisan civil foundations that maintain political independence, akin to American democracy institutes.

III. Milestone 2: Discussion among Korean Experts on South Korea's Role

During the second roundtable meeting held in May 2023, South Korean domestic experts extended the discourse initiated in the inaugural meeting to deliberate on South Korea's role in the establishment of democracy and the assurance of fair electoral processes. The participants encompassed members of the National Assembly, scholars from academia, representatives from the National Election Commission, delegates from the Association of World Election Bodies, and civil society organizations. They collectively reached a consensus on the significance of enhancing the proactive involvement of the South Korean National Assembly in the global promotion of democracy. While South Korea has been actively engaged in various forms of parliamentary diplomacy through forums such as the Parliamentary Diplomacy Forum and the Parliamentary Friendship Association, it was noted that the extent and substance of these endeavors fall short of the international community's expectations for South Korea. In terms of the role of the South Korean National Assembly, the following key points were deliberated upon.

First and foremost, it is worthwhile to contemplate the establishment, endorsement, and oversight of politically independent private foundations by the National Assembly, as exemplified by entities such as the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy (NED), Taiwan's Taiwan Democracy Foundation (TFD), and the UK's Westminster Foundation for Democracy. Through this initiative, the National Assembly could directly contribute to the advancement of global democracy. Furthermore, akin to the U.S. NED, such initiatives have the potential to serve as a catalyst for fostering bipartisan cooperation within the South Korean National

Assembly. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that not only members of the National Assembly, but also public sentiment reflects growing concerns about the state of democracy in South Korea, attributed to escalating political polarization and controversies surrounding the integrity of elections. Considering this context, the persuasiveness of the argument advocating South Korea's commitment to global democracy promotion faces inherent limitations. Consequently, the establishment of a democracy foundation in South Korea, supported by government funding, may currently encounter substantial challenges. Instead, adopting a more long-term perspective and strategy may be imperative.

Secondly, in the medium to long term, there is a need to consider enacting new legislation or enhancing existing laws to facilitate the smoother implementation of South Korea's ongoing global democracy support initiatives. In 2010, South Korea promulgated the Framework Act on International Development Cooperation upon becoming a member of the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), a consultative entity comprising contributors of development aid. Subsequently, in 2020, the National Assembly passed a comprehensive amendment addressing concerns related to the absence of a comprehensive development strategy, fragmentation of programs, and insufficient post-project management. However, the portion of South Korea's democracy support endeavors within official development assistance and international cooperation projects remains relatively meager. This is due to concerns related to the perception that development aid is being utilized for political intentions, such as requiring democratization as a condition for aid or transferring democratic values. Democracy-related development assistance has predominantly centered on knowledge dissemination concerning institutional development

and training programs. Notably, assistance for electoral processes has been chiefly conducted through the National Election Commission, where South Korea imparts its expertise and insights to the National Election Commissions of developing nations, aiding in the enhancement of their electoral management institutions. Presently, South Korea's efforts to contribute to the establishment of democratic governance on the international stage are quantitatively and qualitatively constrained. To devise and execute projects characterized by professional and systematic considerations for democracy, regulatory reforms are imperative to manage these initiatives in an integrated and efficient manner. Particularly, via legislative means, it is pivotal to delineate the scope of initiatives related to the establishment of democratic governance within the existing framework of foreign aid, ensuring the seamless allocation of budgets for such projects. This can augment funding source stability and initiative sustainability.

Thirdly, for these legislative endeavors to come to fruition, South Korea must forge a consensus on its role in the international community concerning the promotion of democracy and the assurance of electoral equity. Furthermore, mechanisms or forums must be established to harness the collective efforts of interested members of the National Assembly. Initially, efforts should be directed toward heightening the National Assembly's interest in the implications of South Korea's democratization experience for the advancement of global democracy. Given that South Korea's National Assembly elections primarily revolve around domestic issues, endeavors to promote democracy and contribute to the international community may not significantly enhance the re-election prospects of its members. Even if there are members of the National Assembly who express interest, a structured framework

for translating these interests into concrete policies is currently lacking. Hence, strategies to rectify this situation must be contemplated. One approach entail organizing workshops and seminars on the promotion of global democracy for members of the National Assembly, complemented by expert lectures, to augment their awareness of the international community's expectations and the significance of South Korea's role in global democracy support. Furthermore, the establishment of a platform for like-minded members of the National Assembly to convene for discussions is paramount. Moreover, collaborative activities aimed at rejuvenating public interest in these issues, such as public hearings involving not only National Assembly members but also experts, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders, should be undertaken.

IV. Conclusion

In recent times, there has been an escalating call from the global community for South Korea to amplify its contributions to the advancement of global democracy, recognizing its successful experience as a recent case of democratization. South Korea's decision to host the Third Summit for Democracy in 2024 can be construed as a response to this mounting demand. The legislative body of South Korea, the National Assembly, which symbolizes South Korean democracy, should also actively partake in endeavors aimed at augmenting the principles of democracy and human rights on a worldwide scale. Regrettably, the current awareness level within our National Assembly concerning international issues, such as the

promotion of global democracy, remains relatively subdued. This is partly linked to prevailing apprehensions surrounding domestic democracy, including the intensification of political polarization and disputes concerning the integrity of elections. Consequently, there exists an insufficient consensus within both public sentiment and the National Assembly regarding the proposition that South Korea should engage in the promotion of global democracy.

Hence, it becomes imperative to initiate efforts to stimulate interest within the National Assembly for fostering global democracy. To convey the international community's expectations for South Korea's role, share South Korea's experience with democratization, and ultimately contribute to the global promotion of democracy, a platform should be established to facilitate discussions among National Assembly members concerning the specific roles that the Korean National Assembly should undertake. In this context, the creation of a bipartisan forum, tentatively labeled as the "Democracy Caucus", could serve as a starting point. Even in the United States, where political polarization is currently perceived to be at its zenith, lawmakers from both the Democratic and Republican parties form bipartisan groups to address critical national issues, transcending their partisan differences. A notable example is the "Problem Solvers Caucus," established in 2017, comprise over 60 members from both parties who collaborate to articulate nonpartisan perspectives on issues such as pandemic response, infrastructure development, healthcare reform, and immigration. Given that the issue of supporting global democracy can garner bipartisan support, a "Democracy Caucus" could provide an avenue for lawmakers from different political parties to exchange ideas and foster cooperation.

Furthermore, it should be considered to amend relevant laws and, if necessary, enact new legislation to ensure that South Korea's current initiatives in supporting global democracy are conducted in a more systematic and sustained manner. Currently, South Korea's development assistance initiatives predominantly concentrate on economic advancement and societal progress. Initiatives within the political sphere, encompassing support for democracy, not only remain relatively modest in scale but are also executed in a disjointed fashion. Consequently, these initiatives face limitations in terms of their capacity to engender a sustained impact on the democratic progress of recipient nations. Specifically, the availability of stable funding assumes paramount importance in the successful execution of international support initiatives. The accessibility of these projects and their feasibility, as well as long-term sustainability, hinge significantly on the consistent provision of funding. Insufficient or erratic funding can undermine the viability of these projects, potentially culminating in the failure of the initiatives themselves.

In the medium to long term, considering our current reality, South Korea need to contemplate the structure and approach for supporting global democracy. Creating independent institution or foundation like NED, which operate independently from the legislature or government, is one approach. Meanwhile, it is also worth considering the establishment of organizations such as a Global Democracy Support Center within the National Assembly's purview or akin institutions, which could delineate the scope of their activities.

Currently, South Korea occupies a pivotal juncture where it can impart its democratization experiences and provide aid to other nations undergoing analogous democratic transitions. In a global context marked by challenges to democratic principles,

the South Korean National Assembly must acknowledge its potential as a stalwart advocate of democracy on the international stage and actively engage in such pursuits. With the impending 2024 Democracy Summit, the present moment presents an opportune occasion for the South Korean National Assembly to deliberate upon its role and prepare for its participation in the promotion of global democracy. ■

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