

Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026

2026 광주민주포럼

NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

REBUILDING

DEMOCRACY

FOR A NEW ERA

NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

Daedong Hall, The May 18 Memorial Cultural Center

2026. 5. 14. THU - 5. 16. SAT

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Rebuilding Democracy for a New Era

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Program

May 14 Thu.

DAY 1

9:30 - 10:00	Registration
10:00 - 12:00	[Keynote] Democracy in Crisis: Ways Forward
12:00 - 13:30	Lunch
13:30 - 15:30	[Thematic] The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities
15:30 - 16:30	[Focus] Venezuela
16:30 - 18:00	[Asia Democracy] Border Insecurity in Southeast Asia and the Crisis of Democracy
18:00 -	[Network Party] Dinner

May 15 Fri.

DAY 2

9:00 - 10:00	Film Screening & Registration
10:00 - 11:50	[Special] Time to FLIP THE HOUSE
11:50 - 13:00	Lunch
13:00 - 14:00	[Special] Time to FLIP THE HOUSE
14:00 - 15:00	[Focus] Iran
15:00 - 18:00	[Transitional Justice] After State Violence and Social Tragedy: The Enduring Trauma
18:00 -	Dinner

May 16 Sat.

DAY 3

9:00 - 10:00	Registration
10:00 - 12:00	[Journalism] Bearing Witness in Conflict Zones: Memory and Trauma
12:00 - 13:00	Lunch
13:00 - 13:40	Meeting of the Laureates of Gwangju Prize
13:40 - 15:00	[Plenary] & Closing Ceremony
15:00 - 21:00	[May 18 Historical Site Visit] & Dinner & [The 46th Anniversary May 18 Democratic Uprising Eve Festival]

Gwangju Democracy Forum(GDF) 2026

Concept Note

○ Theme

– Rebuilding Democracy for a New Era

■ Date: May 14(Thu.) – 16(Sat.), 2026

■ Venue: The May 18 Memorial Cultural Center

■ Modality: In-person (Live streaming available)

■ Language: Kor.-Eng. simultaneous interpretation

■ Host: The May 18 Foundation

■ Co-Organizers : The May 18 Foundation, Korean House for International Solidarity(KHIS), Asia Democracy Network(ADN), Jeonbuk National University Institute for Southeast Asian Studies(JISEAS), A Local Public Policy Platform GWANGJURO, Korean Video Journalist Association(KVJA), ReMedia Center for Media-Based Mental Health and Healing

I . Gwangju Democracy Forum

The Gwangju Democracy Forum (GDF) is an annual international event held in Gwangju, South Korea, in May. Organized by the May 18 Foundation, it commemorates and carries forward the spirit of the May 18 Democratic Uprising. In 2026, the intensifying hegemonic competition between the United States and China will affect other nations, triggering a domino effect of democratic crises. At the forum, we will explore how civil society is addressing these challenges and identify ways to build democratic resilience.

II . Background

Democracy around the world is under threat.

The world is at war. Although there are no armies or gunpowder smoke, wars are being waged simultaneously in many places, with diplomatic power and trade tariffs being used to secure resources and territory. Governments that have failed their citizens respond to public dissent with repression and, in some cases, coercive measures. Citizens around the world are taking to the streets to resist authoritarian control and fight for their freedoms and equality.

Since the end of the Second World War, and throughout the Cold War era, the international community has sought to prevent another tragic confrontation between the great powers, and to address humanity’s shared challenges, by establishing international institutions, adopting conventions and developing international law, in pursuit of a more peaceful world.

However, resource wars, territorial disputes and armed conflicts driven by the greed of the major powers persistently continue to erupt, threatening everyday life. The agreements we made for a better era are cast aside like scraps of paper, while democracy within individual nations recedes and the international order steadily erodes.

The intensifying hegemonic competition between the United States and China, often referred to as the G2, is impacting the security, economy and society of small and medium-sized nations in multiple ways.

At the recent Davos Forum, Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney emphasized the need for solidarity among middle powers, stating:

“Middle powers must act together because if we’re not at the table, we’re on the menu.”

In this context, the restoration of democracy and the rebuilding of the international order cannot be confined to national borders. Meaningful international solidarity is imperative. This must extend beyond alliances between states and governments, encompassing robust and sustained cooperation between civil societies. Civil society actors must also forge transnational bonds in order to confront the challenges of this era. This is not an abstract appeal for unity, but a strategic necessity that enables civil society to exercise tangible influence in defense of democracy.

Under the theme “Rebuilding Democracy for a New Era,” the GDF 2026 will examine the global backsliding of democracy and explore how civil society solidarity must evolve to move forward. In particular, the Forum will provide a platform for Gen-Z activists leading protests on the streets to share their experiences, and for dialogue on the evolving culture and future of civic resistance to take place.

Gwangju Democracy Forum(GDF) 2026

Concept Note

III. GDF 2026 Program

○ [Keynote Session] Democracy in Crisis: Ways Forward

Democracy is facing a global crisis driven by multiple factors, including intensifying great-power rivalry, the rise of far-right politics, and the spread of ‘country first’ agendas.

The United States has been criticized for actions that are perceived as destabilizing the international order, such as imposing of tariffs to exert economic pressure and detaining the Venezuelan president. Statements expressing an intention to incorporate Greenland into US territory have also raised concerns among neighboring countries. Domestically, criticism has emerged that certain economic and immigration policies are pushing democracy and human rights to the brink. In response, citizens have continued to voice their opposition through movements such as anti-authoritarian “No King Protest” and “ICE OUT” demonstrations.

Meanwhile, China has promoted what it describes as ‘socialist Sinocentrism’ and the ‘One China’ principle, seeking to integrate Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau more closely. It has also sought to isolate Taiwan through so-called grey-zone strategies, including cyber isolation and maritime blockades, while pursuing territorial expansion. Furthermore, measures such as restrictions on Korean cultural content (Hallyu) and similar measures affecting Japan have been employed to exert economic pressure on neighboring countries.

Countries in the region, including South Korea and Taiwan, have responded by pursuing diplomatic strategies aimed at avoiding open hostility with either side, while simultaneously continuing efforts to reduce their excessive dependence on both the United States and China.

○ [Thematic Session] The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities

While the preceding keynote session broadly examined the manifestations and causes of the democratic crisis, this thematic session will take the discussion further by focusing on more concrete and actionable responses.

* Although the South Korea’s December 3rd Martial Law Incident in 2024 appears to have formally concluded through judicial proceedings, the crisis of democracy has not ended. Far-right groups

continue to chant “Yoon Again” in defense of the declaration of martial law, revealing a deepening far-right shift within Korean society and an ongoing erosion of democratic norms. This session will examine these far-right trends and the democratic backsliding they entail, while also highlighting how citizens protected democracy through participation and solidarity when they took to the freezing streets last winter.

** Furthermore, solidarity in defense of democracy must extend beyond national borders. Civil society cooperation should include structured information sharing and training exchanges to strengthen activist infrastructure, as well as creating of democracy funds to support the sustainability of civic organizations. The session will explore the possibilities and practical pathways of international solidarity, including engagement with human rights and pro-democracy struggles in neighboring countries and beyond.

***As a third focus, the session will address the growing significance — and unintended consequences — of digital solidarity. Social media has become a crucial tool for exposing state violence and mobilizing protest movements. In response, some governments have attempted to assert control through internet shutdowns and digital restrictions; nonetheless citizens continue to reclaim online spaces through alternative channels and decentralized networks. This topic will address the dynamic cycle of mobilization, repression, and digital resistance unfolding across the online sphere.

The aim of this session is to provide citizens with a platform to explore practical ways to reclaim and safeguard democracy within their own societies and through international cooperation. Also it will facilitate the connection of these efforts across borders, fostering meaningful and sustained solidarity.

○ [Asia Democracy Session] Border Insecurity in Southeast Asia and the Crisis of Democracy

Organized in collaboration with JISEAS, this session will examine the close intertwining of border insecurity in Southeast Asia — particularly in along the border regions of Thailand, Cambodia, and Myanmar, which have recently emerged as “spaces of crisis” marked by armed clashes, civil conflict, and transnational crime — is closely intertwined with the broader crisis of democracy.

Gwangju Democracy Forum(GDF) 2026 Concept Note

In Southeast Asia, borders often function as the frontlines of democracy. Unlike political centers where elections, legislatures, and the rule of law formally operate, border regions are frequently dominated by the military, security apparatuses, armed groups, and informal power structures that exercise political authority in everyday life. In these spaces, democracy and human rights are suspended or excluded, and such “states of exception” have become institutionalized not as temporary measures but as enduring modes of governance.

By reframing border insecurity in Southeast Asia as a democratic issue, this session will critically examine the deep interconnection between militarization justified in the name of ‘stability’, the mobilization of nationalism, and the shrinking of civic space.

○ [Special Session] Time to FLIP THE HOUSE

The deepening wealth concentration and the widening economic and social inequality are driving growing divisions within societies. As the gap between rich and poor becomes more entrenched, marginalized communities are increasingly deprived not only of resources but of life opportunities themselves. In countries such as Nepal and Indonesia, sustained movements resisting inequality have emerged, raising critical questions about these structural injustices. This session will invite Gen-Z at the forefront of civic movements in their countries, who will discuss the broader context of anti-corruption and anti-inequality efforts. It will also explore how social polarization movements have evolved differently in South Korea compared to other contexts. By sharing experiences and engaging in open dialogue, Gen-Z leaders from different countries will have the opportunity to amplify the voices of a new generation shaping the future of civil society.

○ [Transitional Justice Session] After State Violence and Social Tragedy: The Enduring Trauma

In the aftermath of state violence, such as the May 18 Democratic Uprising, institutions such as the National Center for Trauma Recovery (formerly the Gwangju Trauma Center) were established to support the healing of survivors, alongside to develop relevant legal and institutional frameworks. However, large-scale disasters resulting from state inaction or the failure of social safety nets continue to demand accountability from both the state and civil society. Many victims and bereaved families of social tragedies remain outside the effective protection of existing laws and institutions in the wake of repeated major incidents, enduring prolonged suffering as a result.

As a permanent theme of the GDF, the Transitional Justice Session will center on victims, examining legal and institutional frameworks related to trauma while providing a platform for bereaved families of social disasters to share their experiences firsthand. Beyond empathy and solidarity, the session will seek to foster concrete discussions on how the state can establish and strengthen systems that meaningfully address and heal the trauma experienced by victims of social tragedies.

○ [Journalism Session] Bearing Witness in Conflict Zones: Memory and Trauma

Armed conflicts and territorial disputes continue to unfold across the globe. To reveal these harsh realities to the world, journalists in conflict zones risk their lives to document what is happening in the world. The images transmitted through their cameras have played a crucial role in exposing the realities of war and mobilizing international awareness, empathy, and solidarity.

However, we have not paid enough attention to the profound fear they confront in the field, their compassion, or the psychological wounds and trauma they accumulated through their reporting. Organized by the KVJA, this year’s Journalism Session will invite journalists from behind the camera to reflect on their experiences, including the hardships they have endured, their sense of mission, and their personal struggles, which often remain unseen.

○ Side Events

The GDF 2026 will include a dedicated networking party on May 14, providing participating activists and researchers with an opportunity to build networks and exchange ideas. During the event, participants will have the chance to share the situations in their respective countries and introduce the activities of their organizations.

Following the closing of the GDF 2026 on May 16, participants will take part in a tour of key May 18 historic sites, including a visit to the National May 18 Democratic Cemetery. In the evening, they will join the “Night of Democracy” event held along Geumnam-ro.

Marking the 46th anniversary of May 18, a wide range of commemorative events and cultural programs will take place throughout Gwangju. And participants will have the opportunity to experience May in all its many guises.



Chairperson of the May 18 Foundation
Mok-Hyeon Yoon

Welcome to the Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026, distinguished civil society activists and researchers from various countries, and all citizens who cherish democracy. It is my great pleasure to have you here today.

Today, we gather under the theme “Rebuilding Democracy for A New Era.” We are living in a time of profound transformation. The global order is being reshaped, and democracy is facing serious challenges across the world. Hate and discrimination, polarization and misinformation are eroding trust in civil society, while the concentration of power and capital threatens the very foundations of democratic systems.

However, history reminds us of one essential truth: democracy is never given freely. It is sustained and renewed only through the participation, solidarity, sacrifice, and action of citizens. This is a lesson we learned from Gwangju.

In May 1980, the people of Gwangju stood against state violence to defend human dignity and the values of community. Even in the face of armed force, citizens protected one another. Even in despair, they did not abandon hope for democracy. Gwangju is not only a tragic chapter in South Korea’s modern history, but also a powerful symbol of civic solidarity recognized in the global history of democracy.

The Gwangju Democracy Forum is grounded in this very spirit. Here, we aim to share experiences of democratic crises and civic resistance from around the world, and to explore new directions for democracy in this new era. In particular, we seek to highlight the voices of young people and Gen Z, who are creating new cultures of participation in streets and public spaces.

The future of democracy must not belong to a select few or to political elites. It must live and breathe through everyday participation and solidarity among all citizens.



Opening Remarks

During this forum, we will engage in discussions on a wide range of topics, including international solidarity, memory and documentation, hate and extremism, civic participation in the digital age, and democratic networks across Asia. Bringing together people with diverse experiences and languages here in Gwangju to discuss the future of democracy is, in itself, deeply meaningful.

Democracy is not a finished system. It is an ongoing process that must be defended and rebuilt time and again. Gwangju has always stood at the forefront, responding to the pressing questions of each era. Now, we have to move beyond merely remembering the past and chart a new path for the future of democracy.

I hope this Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026 will serve as a valuable opportunity for global civil society to come together, reaffirm solidarity, and renew hope for democratic recovery. I also hope that Gwangju will once again shine as a beacon of solidarity, igniting new hope for democracy worldwide.

Thank you all for being here. I wish you a meaningful and enriching forum filled with thoughtful dialogue and strong solidarity.

Thank you.

May 14, 2026



Administrative Vice Mayor of Gwangju Metropolitan City
Kwang-wan Goh

Distinguished Chairperson Yoon Mok-hyun of the May 18 Memorial Foundation, esteemed guests from home and abroad, and all those joined here today: I am truly delighted to welcome everyone attending the 2026 Gwangju Democracy Forum, held in commemoration of the 46th anniversary of the May 18 Democratization Movement.

In May 1980, the citizens of Gwangju stood firm against bayonets and bullets to protect democracy with their very lives. That spirit is the reason we are gathered here today. Democracies around the world are facing serious challenges.

Amid intensifying geopolitical rivalry and the rise of nation-first policies, the values of freedom and equality that citizens have long defended are being shaken. Our country is no exception. However, citizens did not yield even in the face of adversity. They raised their voices to revive democracy in squares, on the streets, and in digital spaces. This is the contemporary inheritance of the spirit that May 18 left for us.

The theme of this year's Gwangju Democracy Forum, "New Era: Rebooting Democracy," is more than just a slogan. It is a renewed commitment to face the era of crisis head-on and rebuild democracy through the solidarity of civil society. In particular, it is deeply meaningful that this forum serves as a venue for international solidarity, bringing together activists, researchers, and the younger generation leading change from Asia, Europe, the Americas, and beyond.

As a city of May 18, Gwangju Metropolitan City will always support and assist this forum in sharing the values of democracy with the world. I would like to express my deep gratitude to the officials of the co-hosting organizations, including the May 18 Memorial Foundation, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, and the Asia Democracy Network.

Furthermore, I would like to share a few welcoming notes with our participants from home and abroad. On May 18th, all public transportation in Gwangju, including buses, subways, and taxis for the disabled,



Congratulatory Remarks

will be free of charge. You can also experience Gwangju's culture of affection and sharing through the "May Gwangju Sharing Sale," in which local bakeries and social enterprises participate.

I hope you will also join the citywide democracy festival held in the May 18 Democracy Square and the Geumnam-ro area to personally experience the spirit of Daedong (great unity) shown by Gwangju citizens 46 years ago. I hope these three days of the forum will be a precious time to serve as a meaningful opportunity to deepen solidarity and seek collective wisdom for overcoming the crisis of democracy.

Thank you.

May 14, 2026

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Keynote Session

Democracy in Crisis : Ways Forward

[Moderator]

Tae-gyun PARK | Chair, SNU Governance Reform Commission

[Keynote Speech 1]

Trump 2.0 Driven by Power and AI: The Erosion of Democracy by America First and Techno-Libertarianism

Jae-Jung SUH | Visiting Scholar, Duke University

[Keynote Speech 2]

Democracy in the Squeeze: Turning Geopolitical Fear into Democratic Resilience

Hsiu-hua SHEN | Institute of Sociology, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan

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[Keynote Session]

Keynote Speech 1

Trump 2.0 Driven by Power and AI : The Erosion of Democracy by America First and Techno-Libertarianism



Jae-Jung SUH

| Visiting Scholar, Duke University

He has taught international relations at Cornell University, Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), and International Christian University in Japan, and is currently a Visiting Scholar at Duke University and a Research Fellow at Meiji Gakuin University. He is the author of *The Age of Monsters: U.S. Global Strategy in the Twenty-First Century* and *A Shaken Korean Peninsula and Will the U.S. – ROK Alliance Endure?*, among other books and numerous scholarly articles.

Trump 2.0 Driven by Power and AI : The Erosion of Democracy by America First and Techno-Libertarianism

Jae-Jung SUH | Visiting Scholar, Duke University

Introduction

After Donald Trump took office as the 47th President of the United States on January 20, 2025, and launched the “Trump Administration 2.0,” he has generated major upheavals both domestically and internationally. Within the United States, he is strengthening presidential powers and pushing the limits of the U.S. Constitution, while weakening the authority of state governments and threatening the freedom and even the lives of ordinary citizens. Outside the United States, he ignores or openly violates international law and international institutions, imposes unilateral demands on nearly every country, and destroys the sovereignty and right to life of other nations through war. He is strengthening the exercise of state power both inside and outside the U.S., threatening individual freedom and life.

As much as Trump stirs up the world, analyses of him are overflowing, with particular focus on his personal tendencies. This is because Trump is a person with a very unique and intense personality. His “transactional” nature has the power to shake the entire world, thanks to the power concentrated in the U.S. presidency. However, a nation’s policy does not move solely according to the president’s will. Citing the model of American political scientist Graham Allison, the state is both a massive bureaucratic organization and a venue where various individuals and interest groups compete over policy decisions¹⁾

Moreover, the state can only exist through interaction with other states in the international system. Trump’s America is no exception, and the Trump Administration 2.0 is the same. This is why, to forecast the policies and impact of the Trump Administration 2.0, one must comprehensively analyze not only Trump as an individual but also the people and organizations around him, as well as the position of the United States. What, then, is happening in America? How can we explain the simultaneous dismantling of liberal democratic institutions within and beyond the United States?

Authoritarian Control and War under America First

The slogan put forward by the Trump Administration 2.0 is “Make America Great Again”. It has been a slogan since at least the 1980 U.S. presidential election, and further back, since World War I. While its content has varied slightly over time, the Trump Administration 2.0 pursues “America First” both

domestically and internationally. This manifests domestically as policies prioritizing the white middle class and internationally as policies prioritizing America’s economic interests.

First, in domestic politics, President Trump has been pushing policies prioritizing white Americans since the beginning of his second term, exhibiting authoritarian tendencies. Applying the Alien Enemies Act of 1798 to crack down on illegal immigrants was exceptional, but mobilizing federal troops under the pretext of illegal immigration enforcement was a move that challenged the authority of state governments and Congress. Overturning liberal employment policies based on the principles of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and pursuing hostile policies toward transgender individuals were largely aimed at supporters influenced by white supremacist ideology. However, measures such as limiting birthright citizenship through executive orders undermined constitutional limits on presidential power. Furthermore, strengthening censorship and control over universities, the media, and civil society in ways that violated civil rights also undermined checks and balances on the presidency. In other words, in the Trump Administration 2.0, the strengthening of presidential power is taking place in a way that threatens the existing separation of powers and the rule of law, leading to criticisms that it is already an authoritarian government²⁾

However, the way this authoritarianism operates in the Trump Administration 2.0 differs from previous authoritarianism. This is because it takes the form of techno-authoritarianism utilizing advanced technology. For example, the DHS and ICE are not only normalizing state surveillance in airports, streets, courts, and workplaces but are also using AI to make such surveillance more efficient, automated, and rapid. Information gathered through ubiquitous CCTV cameras and sensors is analyzed by AI to identify individuals and track their locations in real time, allowing surveillance and arrest operations to be carried out faster than humans. The Trump Administration 2.0 pursues techno-authoritarianism, where a small group in control of such technology monitors, controls, and excludes the majority.

Meanwhile, proponents of America First perceive that both liberal diplomacy and “neocon” diplomacy are the same in that they represent interventionism. They argue that allies have continued to “free-ride on security” and are eating away at the U.S. economy. The result has been the decline of the U.S., the rise of China, and the accumulation of surpluses by allies. Now, a trend has emerged to pursue U.S. national interests as the highest value and to use force to make America great again. This combination

1) Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, Longman 1999.

2) Steven Levitsky, Lucan A. Way, and Daniel Ziblatt, “The Price of American Authoritarianism: What Can Reverse Democratic Decline?” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2026, pp. 30–43.

of MAGA and America First can be evaluated as “unapologetic realism.” It prioritizes U.S. interests, such as restoring national fiscal health and reviving manufacturing, by overtly exercising power.

This is clearly revealed in the State Department’s “Strategic Plan for Fiscal Years 2026–2030.” The strategic plan presents six strategic goals, including leadership in the Western Hemisphere, U.S. national sovereignty, peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific, rebuilding so-called “civilizational alliances” with European nations, economic and technological superiority, and foreign aid prioritizing national interests. This reflects the reality that although America Firsters, including President Trump himself, view U.S. global intervention critically, they cannot entirely deny that U.S. interests are spread across the world. The United States does not want to retreat quietly from global affairs as long as it retains its power; rather, it seeks to exercise that power more efficiently in order to maintain global dominance. If the empire operated a liberal international order through international organizations and systems when it had power, it now seeks to protect its interests by overtly exercising power because the costs have become higher than the benefits.

However, the Trump Administration 2.0 also emphasizes advanced technology in its foreign policy. The direction of “overwhelming economic and technological superiority” contained in the “2025 National Security Strategy” report, the “State Department Strategic Plan,” and the “2026 Defense Strategy” goes far beyond simply protecting America’s scientific and technological edge or reviving its productivity. It posits that advanced science and technology, such as AI and quantum computing, are revolutionizing the economic system itself, and that the group that controls AI and quantum computing will dominate the future world. In this context, the “2025 National Security Strategy” report pursues technological hegemony, arguing that not only strong military power but also “the strongest, most dynamic, most innovative, and most advanced economy” and “the most advanced science, technology, and innovation” are essential to U.S. national security.

Aristopopulism Beneath Techno-Libertarianism

The New York Times commented that Trump had elevated the American “imperial presidency” to an unprecedented level.³⁾ Moreover, Trump is acting as an “imperialist president” atop this imperial presidency⁴⁾ The Trump Administration 2.0 is attempting to lead America into a “new golden age” by mobilizing advanced technologies to build techno-authoritarianism and techno-hegemony. Looking back, the U.S. has attempted various response strategies in the 21st century. The Obama

3) Peter Baker, “Trump Takes America’s ‘Imperial Presidency’ to a New Level,” The New York Times, December 21, 2025.
4) “America has an imperial presidency: And in Donald Trump, an imperialist president for the first time in over a century,” The Economist, January 23, 2025.

administration declared a “rebalance to Asia” shifting America’s strategic focus from Europe and the Middle East toward Asia in order to contain China’s rise. Trump 1.0 designated China as the primary adversary and began more aggressive policies. The Biden administration, while sharing the same strategic assessment, sought to constrain China more tightly through alliances and minilateral institutions. As these proved insufficient, the Trump Administration 2.0 is attempting to reorganize the political economy based on high-tech.

The forces leading this vision are individuals like Peter Thiel, Elon Musk, and Marc Andreessen, and emerging high-tech companies such as Palantir, Anduril, and SpaceX. They are actively working to realize their ideology of “techno-libertarianism”⁵⁾ This is a vision that high-tech will drastically increase productivity and significantly reducing government inefficiency, ultimately maximizing individual freedom. They believe that advanced technologies like AI and cryptocurrency will free individuals from state control. While they value freedom, they differ fundamentally from classical liberalism by believing corporations and individuals must be free from government. Alexander Karp, CEO of Palantir, sees competition with China through the lens of a “technological Cold War”⁶⁾

The ideal they are pursuing appears similar to “techno-feudalism,” presented by Yanis Varoufakis, where IT companies monopolize “digital fiefdoms” as platforms, treating users like “serfs”⁷⁾ However, Varoufakis’s argument has limitations. It seems more appropriate to view it as “intellectual monopoly capitalism”—one of the forms through which modern capitalism has evolved alongside advances in science and technology in response to scientific/technological development.⁸⁾ The Trump Administration 2.0 is attempting to renew America’s hegemonic status while revamping the U.S. economy by intensively fostering AI and quantum computing. A small number of high-tech companies and elites are the planners and direct beneficiaries. The shadow of “aristopopulism”—the idea that a small number of high-tech elites should lead the economy and politics to lead what they regard as an uninformed mass public—hangs heavily over the Trump Administration 2.0.⁹⁾ The “golden age” they envision is ultimately a golden age for a new class of high-tech elites who dominate AI and quantum computing.

5) 줄고, 「트럼프 정부 2.0, 위기인가 기회인가」, 『창작과비평』 (2025년 겨울호) 참조.
6) Alexander Karp and Nicholas W. Zamiska, The Technological Republic: Hard Power, Soft Belief, and the Future of the West, Crown Currency 2025.
7) Yanis Varoufakis, Technofeudalism: What Killed Capitalism (Vintage, 2024).
8) Mateo Crossa, & Cristobal Reyes, “‘Technofeudalism’ and ‘Intellectual Monopoly Capitalism’: A Critical Review,” Review of Radical Political Economics (December 29, 2025).
9) 아리스토폴리즘에 대해서는 Patrick J. Deneen, “Aristopopulism: A Political Proposal for America,” First Things 2019.3.20; 초국적 극우 네트워크에 대해서는 유정애, 「초국적 극우연대와 한국 민주주의의 도전」, 『창작과비평』 (2026년 봄호) 참조.

Conclusion: Techno-Authoritarianism and Techno-Hegemonic Rule

The MAGA forces supporting the Trump Administration 2.0 expect President Trump to resolve the economic and social insecurities of the white middle class. However, as the economic foundations, political trust, and social cohesion of American society continue to erode, data, AI, and satellite technologies centered around big tech continue to expand disproportionately.

In the twilight years of the American empire, the fusion of the military-industrial complex and big tech is increasingly taking the form of techno-authoritarianism and techno-hegemonic rule.



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[Keynote Session]

Keynote Speech 2

Democracy in the Squeeze : Turning Geopolitical Fear into Democratic Resilience



Hsiu-hua SHEN

| Institute of Sociology, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan

Hsiu-hua Shen is a feminist scholar and activist at National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan. Her research examines the intersections of gender, migration, and border politics, particularly regarding Taiwan-China relations. Her work on the 228 Massacre's widows is credited with reshaping historical memory through a gendered analysis of state violence. A former president of the Awakening Foundation, Shen integrates academic rigor with feminist intervention. As regional tensions intensify, she works to ensure feminist frameworks are central to how Taiwanese society understands and responds to its complex geopolitical and security crises.

Democracy in the Squeeze : Turning Geopolitical Fear into Democratic Resilience

Hsiu-hua SHEN | Institute of Sociology, National Tsing Hua University, Taiwan

Friends, colleagues, and defenders of the democratic spirit:

It is a profound honor to stand here in Gwangju. In May 1980, the citizens of this city confronted state violence that sought to redefine them as enemies of the nation. What unfolded here was an unyielding assertion of civil agency. It was the moment Gwangju decided that its future would be written by its own citizens, not by the dictates of a military regime or the strategic coldness of distant powers.

The legacy of Gwangju reminds us that democracy is not simply a constitutional arrangement; it is a fragile practice sustained by citizens who refuse the terms imposed upon them by power. Today, in 2026, we face a new “democratic compression.” Our societies in the region are being squeezed by the tectonic friction between the United States and the People’s Republic of China. As we navigate this “new era,” we must ask: How does a society defend its borders without losing its democratic soul?

From Strategic Rivalry to Democratic Compression

The intensification of China–U.S. rivalry has reshaped Asia into a landscape of binary frameworks. In this “squeeze,” many East Asian societies are repositioned not as democratic communities, but as strategic locations, such as frontlines or buffers. In this environment, we witness a painful social erosion: we begin to dehumanize and discredit each other. When we view our neighbors only through the binary of “security” or “threat,” we stop seeing them as fellow citizens and start seeing them as obstacles to survival.

This generates what I call “democratic compression.” It is a process where the expansive, pluralistic nature of democracy is squeezed by the heavy weight of strategic necessity. In this situation, the “breathing room” required for social experimentation, long-term reform, and diversity is narrowed. We find that our democratic space is not necessarily closed, but it is increasingly crowded by the language of security and the presence of external threats.

In the specific context of Taiwan, this pressure is particularly acute. Under sustained military, informational, and diplomatic pressure from China, Taiwan’s political field is increasingly structured by the imperative of survival. This does not mean that domestic choices are completely dictated by the state; rather, it means that the persistent threat has narrowed our democratic space by forcing us to view many things, from energy transitions to social rights, through the lens of national security.

Furthermore, this pressure generates internal social divisions, as different groups disagree on how much “security logic” we should allow to permeate our private and political lives.

Securitization, Fear, and the Echo of Internal Enemies

One of the most significant mechanisms of this rivalry is the securitization of everyday life. When digital infrastructure, education, and even public health are framed largely as matters of “security,” fear risks becoming a governing principle. This shift moves these essential services out of the realm of open democratic debate and into the shadows of strategic necessity. In this environment, criticism of the securitization of everyday life can be unfairly framed as disloyalty or as an act that endangers society. While we must remain vigilant, we must also resist the trend of dismissing calls for nuance or diplomatic complexity as signs of weakness. This dynamic erodes the middle ground, the space where democratic negotiation occurs, and risks redefining our fellow citizens as potential risks or enemies rather than partners in a shared community.

Rethinking Peace: A Feminist Perspective

In the squeeze, we must rethink “peace.” For those of us living under persistent pressure, peace is not a passive state or the mere absence of conflict; it is a continuous practice. A feminist perspective rejects the binary between “total war” and “total submission.” In Taiwan, we know that we must fight for peace, not through aggression, but by building a society so resilient, inclusive, and self-aware that it cannot be coerced. Our social progress in Taiwan, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage and continuing advocacy for human rights and social equality, is a form of normative resistance. These values create a democratic identity fundamentally incompatible with authoritarian rule and serve as a shield, demonstrating that our greatest strength lies in our refusal to abandon our progressive ideals under pressure.

Care as Infrastructure: The Social Basis of Resilience

If geopolitical rivalry compresses our space, what enables us to endure? I argue that resilience depends on “care as infrastructure,” the idea that social support systems, such as healthcare, childcare, and community trust, are just as essential to a nation’s functioning and defense as roads, bridges, weapons, and power grids. It suggests that a society’s true resilience in times of crisis depends on the strength of its human networks and the invisible labor of those who sustain collective well-being.

In Taiwan, initiatives such as media literacy campaigns, community-based preparedness programs, and grassroots coordination networks demonstrate how care-based practices can directly contribute to democratic resilience. These efforts empower citizens to navigate disinformation and crisis not only through state-led commands, but also through community-led trust.

In addition, in recent years, individual women and gender-focused organizations have moved into domains historically coded as masculine, such as civil defense. By participating in training workshops and emergency response programs, women ensure that security is distributed across society and embedded in everyday preparedness. Civil women’s organizations are also bringing public attention to the needs of various vulnerable groups in times of conflict. They seek to question militarized assumptions and advocate for more inclusive approaches to security: to address the needs of marginalized communities during conflict, to ensure that resources and capacities, including specialized training, are equipped to those communities, and to insist on a transparent and inclusive approach to security. Their presence proves that a society is only truly “secure” when its defense strategy accounts for everyone.

Conclusion: Resilience Must Remain Democratic

The intensification of geopolitical rivalry tempts us to prioritize centralized control. We must resist this. The lessons of Gwangju remain urgent: democracy is defended through the practices of citizens who sustain one another.

To “Rebuild Democracy,” we must insist that:

- 1) Resilience must remain democratic. A top-down defense is a hollow shell that breaks under pressure; a grassroots defense is a living web that adapts and endures. We must ensure that the tools we use to protect our society do not become the tools that eventually dismantle our liberties.
- 2) Care is a strategic asset. Social trust is the only effective shield against cognitive warfare. By investing in the well-being and connectivity of our citizens, we create a social fabric that helps reduce the risk of foreign and domestic interference tearing it apart.
- 3) Peace is an active labor. We defend our way of life by living it more fully, not by suspending it in the name of security. Our commitment to pluralism and human rights is not a distraction from our defense, but the very reason our defense matters.

The question is not only how democracies survive, but what kind of democracy survives. Let us ensure that the society that emerges from this “squeeze” remains humane, inclusive, and grounded in the spirit of civil agency and solidarity we honor here today.



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Thematic Session

The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities

[Moderator]

Eun-young Oh | Researcher, The May 18 Institute Chonnam National University

[Speech 1]

The Crisis of the Democratic Republic and Paths to Overcoming It: A Citizen-Centered Analysis of the December 3 Insurrection

Yeon-soon Chung | Attorney at law, Law firm KYONG

[Speech 2]

Digital Authoritarianism? Beyond Freedom of Expression: Responding to Media and Internet Suppression

Priya Sigdel | Co-founder of Hatti Hatti Nepal, Social Entrepreneur, Media

[Speech 3]

The Revolution of Light and Institutionalizing Participatory Democracy

- Civil Society Efforts for a Citizen Participation Act and National Civic Participation Commission

Tae-ho LEE | Chair of the Citizens' Committee, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy

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[Thematic Session]

Speech 1

The Crisis of the Democratic Republic and Paths to Overcoming It : A Citizen-Centered Analysis of the December 3 Insurrection



Yeon-soon Chung

| Attorney at law, Law firm KYONG

She formerly served as President of Lawyers for a Democratic Society and Director of the Jeju 4·3 Peace Foundation, and is currently a Director of the Hankyoreh Foundation for Reunification and Culture.

The Crisis of the Democratic Republic and Paths to Overcoming It: A Citizen-Centered Analysis of the December 3 Insurrection

Yeon-soon Chung | Attorney at law, Law firm KYONG

1. Introduction

The emergency martial law declared on December 3, 2024, was a shocking event that brought a major crisis to the constitutional order. President Yoon Suk-yeol's act of declaring martial law was suppressed within a few hours by the swift response of the National Assembly and the courage of citizens who braved personal danger. The subsequent four-month persistent struggle of the citizens, leading up to the impeachment resolution by the National Assembly and the presidential dismissal decision by the Constitutional Court, was a drama-like defense of the constitution that drew praise and inspiration from around the world. Through this, Korean society proved the maturity of its protest culture and the power of solidarity to the world, but at the same time, the vulnerabilities of our democracy were also clearly witnessed. The reason why democracy, which we vaguely thought would never fall below a certain line because we had won it ourselves, faced a decisive crisis can be analyzed from various aspects and perspectives. In this article, I wish to reflect on the core proposition of Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution: "The Republic of Korea shall be a democratic republic."

2. Meaning and Crisis of the Democratic Republic

The 'Republic' in the democratic republic declared by Article 1 of the Constitution is based on the ideology of republicanism, which aims for rule by equal members of the entire community, excluding despotic rule by specific individuals or specific forces (Constitutional Court Decision 2013Heon-Da1, Dec. 19, 2014). Specifically, it is realized through systems such as the separation of powers, rule of law, popular sovereignty, the multi-party system or parliamentary representation through elections, the independence of the judiciary, and local autonomy. Most importantly, it is the members who possess the qualifications of republican citizens who support and uphold these institutional guarantees—the existence of the sovereign. The 12.3 insurrection revealed that several cracks had occurred in these elements.

The crisis arose from several aspects. The first was President Yoon Suk-yeol, the second was the bureaucratic elites who had a duty to be devoted to the Constitution and the sovereign, and the third was the judiciary, which was suspected of attempting to intervene in politics by expeditiously processing unprecedented trials for presidential candidates while cancelling the detention of insurrection leaders.

However, a more fundamental problem lay in the emergence of so-called far-right forces—people who defended the insurrectionists even after the martial law attempt and thought dictatorship was better than democracy, and those who attacked the courts while denying republicanism and due process.

There may be various factors behind their emergence and background, but a significant one is the deepening division, conflict, and animosity in our society since democratization. There are various analyses on where those conflicts are rooted and how they have been amplified. However, it is clear that this is not a problem for which responsibility can be placed solely on those called the far-right, conservative parties, or specific power holders. The 'two squares' that appeared during the insurrection process left deep scars and a psychological state of civil war in our society. While judicial punishment for the leaders of the rebellion is ongoing along with the launch of the new government, the critical task of how to protect the democratic republic in a state of extreme confrontation with those who deny republicanism from its foundations remains unresolved.

3. For the Democratic Republic Again

Legal and institutional improvements to overcome the insurrection have been implemented or are being promoted. The Martial Law Act was amended to stipulate that the constitutional functions of the National Assembly cannot be physically blocked even during martial law, and an amendment to the Military Service Act is being promoted to stipulate that illegal orders from the military can be disobeyed. There are efforts to make constitutional value education mandatory for all public officials, and the three judicial reform laws—including constitutional complaints regarding trials, the crime of distorting the law, and increasing the number of Supreme Court justices—passed the plenary session in March 2026.

However, a more fundamental and important task than institutional improvement is how to cultivate citizens of the republic and how to raise the level of defensive democracy in our society. If we can find a characteristic of the 12.3 incident that differs from the past, it is the fact that despite the insurrection being legally suppressed according to procedure within a few hours, two divided squares of citizens confronting each other occurred for several months afterward. Integrating these is an urgent task.

At this point, we look at republicanism again. Republicanism goes beyond procedural democracy and requires citizens to live as members of a community that recognizes and guarantees the freedom and dignity of others. For this requirement to be realized, the condition that each member can enjoy freedom as the subject of their life must be met. Freedom here does not mean passive freedom from interference by power, but freedom where participation and visibility as public citizens are guaranteed. Only on the conditions of a life guaranteed by diversity and pluralism, free from discrimination, can the qualifications of a republican citizen be given.

A citizen of the republic should be a subject who practices public responsibility and virtue, not just a person with legal status like nationality. The ‘virtue’ of republicanism is not an abstract morality, but an attitude and practice for different beings to coexist equally. Therefore, republican citizens must have an attitude of not tolerating hate, discrimination, and exclusion, which is also the way to protect the freedom of the entire community. Article 10 (Human Dignity) and Article 11 (Right to Equality) of the Constitution constitute the basis of this republicanism, and these are not just declamatory phrases but tasks to be realized in concrete reality. For a democratic republic to exist, the promises of the Constitution must be felt in the actual field of life.

This does not lie solely in the preparation of systems; it depends on the consciousness and practice of individual citizens. In that regard, the voices and participation of social minorities, sexual minorities, the disabled, and immigrants—who have long been forced into silence—are central to forming the common good that the community should aim for.

4. Practice for the Future of the Democratic Republic

What is more important than institutional improvement is the ‘civic virtue’ that sustains the democratic republic. For democracy not to become fossilized, it is important to cultivate the virtue of republican citizens and raise the level of sharing constitutional values that do not waver in any situation. The will and execution of power institutions to comply with the Constitution will also become stronger only on such a foundation. For this, I propose the following practices.

First, the defensive line of democracy should be made clear through constitutional amendment. For example, by including the spirit of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement in the preamble of the Constitution, it stipulates that all members of the republic have an ethical and constitutional duty to protect the Constitution and democracy and resist injustice.

Second, we must reflect on and implement what needs to be done to resolve far-right forces and end conflict and confrontation. Strict punishment, a digital media environment that can exercise autonomous self-purification, and the prohibition of hate and incitement are among the concrete implementation plans. Above all, the public arena, a culture of deliberation, and the emergence and activation of mediators are important so that social and political issues do not immediately flow into a confrontation structure when triggered. To this end, we need a culture that breaks down the boundaries between friend and foe and welcomes competitors or enemies as ‘guests’ rather than enemies, and the movement to expand that space must continue. This is not a movement that the government or a specific system can entirely accomplish. Genuine civic participation starts here, takes root, and must expand.

Third, systems, laws, and culture must be reorganized to substantially grant the qualifications of a republican citizen to everyone. Republicanism demands virtue from the citizens of the republic. The existence of citizens with such virtues—respect for others, the responsibility to protect the freedom of social minorities and the weak, and a practical attitude of participating in deliberation with a rational mindset—is the most important defense against the crisis of democracy. The enactment and implementation of the Anti-Discrimination Act to cultivate republican citizens, democratic citizenship education, and the alleviation of socio-economic inequality to raise the economic conditions of life to a minimum level are necessary.

5. Closing Remarks

The power to overcome division comes from recognizing the other not as an enemy but as a ‘fellow gardener’ who must cultivate the garden together. Those called the far-right are also people who live with us and must cultivate the square together. The task of leading them to possess the virtues of republican citizens requires me, us, and civic groups who contemplate this problem to first possess those virtues. The finger pointing at the other must first point at myself. Endless dialogue and hospitality, a healthy skepticism that does not think of a specific system or ideology as the ultimate good but keeps a critical distance, an increase in qualitative participation that goes beyond simple slogan politics to deeply debate complex social issues and find consensus, the use of language that does not drive the opponent into a corner, and the refusal of hate speech and incitement are practical acts that must start from self-criticism first. While these are possible in grand discourses such as systems and politics, they are paradoxically things that can be practiced at any time in my daily life. And this will be the greatest defense against the crisis of democracy and a second insurrection.

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[Thematic Session]

Speech 2

Digital Authoritarianism? Beyond Freedom of Expression : Responding to Media and Internet Suppression



Priya Sigdel

| Co-founder of Hatti Hatti Nepal, Social Entrepreneur, Media

Priya Sigdel is Co-founder and President of Hatti Hatti Nepal, where she works to empower marginalized women through vocational training and social entrepreneurship. She has represented Nepal internationally as a young changemaker and social entrepreneur, and is widely engaged as a public speaker and activist promoting women's leadership and vocational skills. She is also a semifinalist of Miss Earth 2018 and host of a program on Kantipur Television.

Digital Authoritarianism? Beyond Freedom of Expression: Responding to Media and Internet Suppression

Priya Sigdel | Co-founder of Hatti Hatti Nepal, Social Entrepreneur, Media

To understand the Gen Z protests of September 8, it is important to situate Nepal within its democratic journey. The 2006 People’s Movement II ended monarchy and led to the 2015 Constitution, establishing Nepal as a federal democratic republic grounded in inclusion and proportional representation.

Despite these institutional gains, governance challenges remain deeply rooted. Nepal’s score of 34 out of 100 in the 2025 Corruption Perceptions Index reflects persistent systemic issues and weak public trust. At the same time, large-scale youth migration continues to reshape the country’s social fabric, creating both physical and emotional distance between young citizens and the state.

Over time, this has produced a widening generational divide between political leadership and youth, one that forms the backdrop of the protests.

The protests did not emerge in isolation. Across South Asia, specially after Bangladesh and Sri Lanka youth-led movements have reflected growing dissatisfaction with governance systems. In Nepal, this sentiment increasingly took shape in digital spaces, where social media became a platform for political critique, identity, and mobilization.

Concerns around regulation, surveillance, and media control did not emerge in isolation, they built upon a growing sense of frustration among young people. To understand why September 8 happened, it is important to look at what was unfolding in the digital space just before it. A regional wave, particularly influenced by trends from the Philippines, brought the “nepo baby” discourse into public conversation. The song “The Winner Takes It All” became symbolic of a deeper resentment, as young people began calling out the visible privilege of children of politicians and government contractors who openly displayed lavish lifestyles.

In Nepal, this quickly turned into public outrage. Instead of engaging with the concerns, some government supporters dismissed the frustration, telling young people that if their parents were poor, they should blame their families rather than the system. This response did not diffuse anger, it intensified it. Some individuals deactivated their accounts under pressure, while others remained unapologetic, further fueling public resentment.

At the same time, digital space itself was being restricted. TikTok had already been limited by the government, and as conversations grew, other platforms also faced controls. As a result, what was being discussed widely across the region could not fully surface in Nepal’s digital ecosystem. Mainstream narratives began framing the issue as “Gen Z going out of control on social media,” but the reality was far deeper, this was about accumulated frustration, inequality, and lack of accountability.

I was present on September 8, standing in solidarity, holding placards alongside many others. While the movement was led by Gen Z, it was not limited to them. Many millennials like myself, who had witnessed Nepal’s transitions over the years and felt increasingly powerless within the system, saw this as a moment to stand up. The protest itself was peaceful. There were different kinds of participants, those leading from the frontlines, those energizing the crowd, and those simply there to show solidarity, but the intent was collective and clear.

What followed was a rapid and deeply troubling escalation. Crowd control measures failed. Protesters were targeted in ways that suggested intent beyond dispersal, with injuries concentrated on the head and upper body. What began as voices raised in protest quickly turned into silence. In that moment, the state’s response, or lack of it, became defining. The Prime Minister and government remained largely silent.

At the same time, media narratives began circulating claims that protesters were attacking parliament, shifting the focus away from what had actually triggered the movement. This created a sharp divide in public perception. The deaths and injuries of September 8 became the emotional and political trigger for what followed.

This moment illustrates the dual nature of digital space. It can function as a mechanism of control through surveillance, narrative framing, and information distortion, while also serving as a tool for resistance, enabling decentralized communication and truth-building. September 9 was no longer about protest, it was about anger. The grief of September 8 had transformed into collective outrage. Despite curfews being imposed, people continued to pour into the streets. Nothing could contain what had been building for years. What followed was chaos at a national scale, destruction of infrastructure, attacks driven by both public anger and political interests, and a complete breakdown of order. The Prime Minister eventually resigned, parliament was dissolved, and for a moment, Nepal stood without clear leadership.

But alongside what was happening on the streets, another battle was unfolding, one of narratives.

Media coverage largely focused on the violence, quickly labeling the movement as “Gen Z gone wild,” while overlooking the deeper systemic causes that had led to this point. At the same time, actions carried out by unidentified groups were attributed to the protesters, further distorting the legitimacy of the movement. As Nepal began trending globally, misinformation spread rapidly. Old videos from protests in other countries circulated as footage from Nepal. False claims emerged, including narratives that Gen Z protesters were responsible for killings or that the protests were merely about social media restrictions. In this environment, digital platforms have become critical sites of civic action, and for me, a space of responsibility.

Through my own platforms, I actively worked to counter these false narratives. I shared real-time ground realities, clarified misinformation, and consistently brought the focus back to what the movement was truly about, accountability, corruption, and systemic failure. What started as an individual effort quickly gained traction. My content reached audiences not only across Nepal but also internationally, generating over 10 million engagements at a time when people were trying to understand what was really happening on the ground. This moment reinforced a critical reality: digital spaces are not just channels of communication; they are battlegrounds of truth. While they can be used to distort, distract, and control narratives, they can also be reclaimed to document, resist, and reframe reality.

Recent governance trends in Nepal reflect a shift toward increased digitalization and centralization. While framed as efforts to improve efficiency, these developments raise important concerns regarding surveillance, data control, and the shrinking of civic space.

The growing use of regulatory ambiguity, monitoring of digital expression, and pressure on independent media contributes to an environment where freedom of expression becomes uncertain. Rather than overt censorship, control is often exercised subtly through systems and narratives.

Media institutions are operating under increasing pressure. Policy directions that prioritize state-controlled communication risk weakening independent journalism and reducing diversity within the media landscape.

During the protests, misinformation and selective narratives played a significant role in shaping public perception. This highlights how information ecosystems can be influenced to redirect attention away from structural issues toward surface-level events.

Despite these challenges, digital platforms continue to offer important opportunities for democratic engagement. They enable new forms of participation, particularly among youth, and create spaces for decentralized dialogue and mobilization.

Strengthening digital rights, ensuring transparency in governance, supporting independent media, and promoting digital literacy are critical steps in ensuring that digital transformation strengthens rather than undermines democracy.

The Gen Z protests reflect a deeper democratic tension between control and participation. Digital authoritarianism does not always manifest through visible repression. It operates through gradual shifts in systems, narratives, and access. At the same time, digital spaces hold the potential to challenge these dynamics and reimagine democratic engagement.

The future of democracy will depend on how these spaces are governed, and who has the power to shape them.

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[Thematic Session]

Speech 3

The Revolution of Light and Institutionalizing Participatory Democracy

- Civil Society Efforts for a Citizen Participation Act
and National Civic Participation Commission



Tae-ho LEE

| Chair of the Citizens' Committee, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy

He serves as Chair of the Citizens' Committee of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy and is affiliated with the Civil Society Steering Committee for the Establishment of the National Commission for Civic Participation.

The Revolution of Light and Institutionalizing Participatory Democracy

- Civil Society Efforts for a Citizen Participation Act and National Civic Participation Commission

Tae-ho LEE | Chair of the Citizens' Committee, People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy

1. The "Light Revolution" and Discussions on the Enactment of the Framework Act on Civic Participation

Through the December 3 emergency martial law crisis and the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol, citizens peacefully defended the democratic constitutional order through their democratic capacity. However, political and social polarization and social conflict continue to persist. It has been proven that the recovery of people's livelihoods and the economy is difficult without the recovery of democracy, yet distrust and antagonism in politics are obstructing civic participation and the formation of a mature public sphere.

This phenomenon of political polarization is not unique to Korea. In many European countries, the United States, and Japan, which had been regarded as relatively established democracies, far-right forces have either taken power or grown to a level where they are capable of doing so. These societies are experiencing deepening political polarization, the collapse of the public sphere, and the shrinking of democratic space.

Amid these adverse domestic and international conditions, it is urgent to institutionalize participatory and deliberative democracy, expand democratic citizenship education, and strengthen the democratic resilience of both civil society and state institutions as a whole through the revitalization of civil society, in order to sustain and strengthen the people's sovereign will and capacity, as confirmed in the "Light Revolution," as a driving force for change.

There have been efforts at the levels of the central government and local governments to build a democratic foundation based on civic participation. Discussions have taken place individually in various fields, including "building civic participation platforms," "institutionalizing participatory autonomy for citizens and residents," "expanding deliberative public forums," "promoting democratic citizenship education," "revitalizing civil society and public-private cooperation," "expanding local autonomy and village-building," and "fostering the social solidarity economy." However, these discussions have not developed into a comprehensive national system to guarantee and promote civic participation.

Civil society has consistently pointed out that, in order to ease the political polarization and democratic regression further deepened by the December 3 martial law crisis and the impeachment process of

President Yoon Suk-yeol, it is urgent to introduce and establish systems for citizens' direct participation in policy-making and deliberative democracy that can supplement representative democracy, along with political institutional reforms such as an electoral system capable of reflecting the diversity of public opinion.

The Emergency Action for the Immediate Ouster of Yoon Suk-yeol and Social Reform, which organized the light-stick rallies calling for impeachment, presented the introduction of a "Citizens' Assembly" as one of its 123 reform tasks and selected it as one of the three priority reform tasks in the fields of politics, the judiciary, and administration. Meanwhile, during the presidential election period immediately following the impeachment, civil society organizations, including the Korea Civil Society Network (KCSN) and the National Network for Activating Civil Society (Si-hwal-net), signed a package policy agreement with the Democratic Party's presidential campaign headquarters on the operation of a National Citizens' Council, the enactment of the Framework Act on Civil Society and the establishment of a Civil Society Committee, and the enactment of the Democratic Citizenship Education Support Act.

Based on this policy agreement, member organizations of KCSN and Si-hwal-net explored ways to integrate and improve civic participation and civil society support and promotion tasks, which had been fragmented across ministries and managed in a control-oriented manner, into a comprehensive and proactive system that actively guarantees civic participation. In particular, they focused on institutionalizing a comprehensive promotion system for civic participation in order to secure stability, independence, and autonomy so that it would not fluctuate according to changes in government or policy.

After the presidential election, civil society organizations began designing a comprehensive civic participation promotion system based on the policy agreement. The main discussions took place within the State Affairs Planning Committee, which formalized the Lee Jae-myung administration's national policy agenda. Based on about two months of discussion, the Lee Jae-myung administration defined "civic participation" as a right of citizens and a responsibility of the state, and adopted the enactment of the Framework Act on Civic Participation as a national policy task. The core of the Act is to establish and operate a national administrative commission on civic participation, tentatively named the "National Commission for Civic Participation," as a comprehensive promotion system for this purpose.

The areas of civic participation that the Framework Act on Civic Participation seeks to guarantee as a right consist broadly of four areas: participation in policy-making, participation in deliberative public discourse processes, participation in democratic citizenship education, and participation in voluntary civil society activities.

2. Key Contents and Legislative Status of the Framework Act on Civic Participation Key Contents

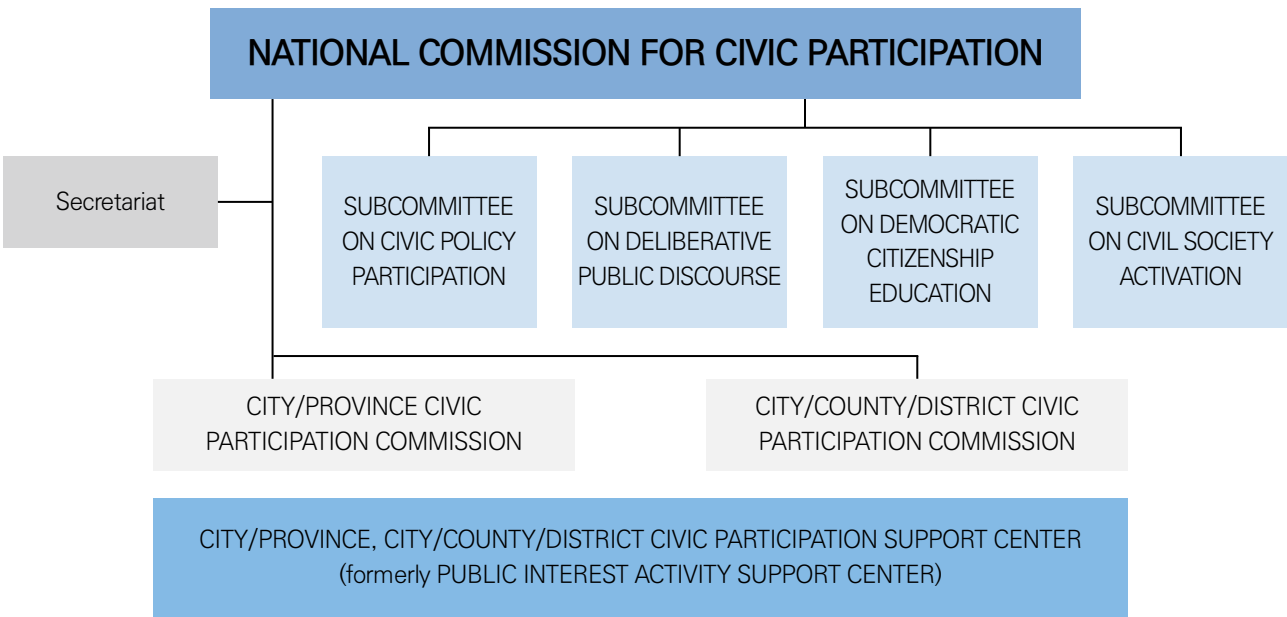
주요내용

- Purpose
 - To establish a comprehensive promotion system to guarantee and activate civic participation.
 - To contribute to the development of democracy, the promotion of the public interest, and the enhancement of social integration.
- Definition of Citizen
 - Citizens include nationals or residents, including foreigners registered under Article 31 of the Immigration Act and persons who have reported domestic residence under Article 6 of the Act on the Immigration and Legal Status of Overseas Koreans.
- Definition of Civic Participation
 - Civic participation refers to voluntary acts by which citizens, individually or collectively, participate in various areas, including society, the economy, and institutions, in order to realize rights and the public interest and enhance social value.
 - Specifically, it includes participation in policy-making, deliberative public discourse, democratic citizenship education, and voluntary civil society activities.
- Basic Principles
 - The State and local governments shall recognize and respect the social value and contribution of civic participation, and shall establish and implement policies in accordance with basic principles such as improving institutional and social factors that restrict civic participation.
- Rights of Citizens
 - Citizens have the right to participate in public policy decision-making processes, carry out voluntary civil society activities, and receive education to strengthen their capacity as democratic citizens in order to realize their rights, interests, and social values.
- Responsibilities of the State and Local Governments
 - The State and local governments shall establish and implement necessary policies and seek support measures to guarantee and activate civic participation.
 - They shall take necessary budgetary measures, including securing the required financial resources.
- Establishment of a Comprehensive System for Civic Participation
 - Improvement of policies and institutions to activate civic participation.

- Establishment and implementation of civic participation plans.
- Surveys, research, and the establishment of statistics on civic participation.
- Education and public outreach regarding civic participation.
- Establishment and Implementation of Master Plans for Civic Participation
 - Formulation and implementation of master plans for the systematic and efficient promotion of civic participation.
 - Establishment of a master plan by the Commission every five years and implementation plans by central administrative agencies and cities/provinces every year, covering policy directions and goals, improvement of laws and systems, policy and task cooperation within government, surveys and research, securing of financial resources, and public-private cooperation.
- Overview of the Establishment of the National Commission for Civic Participation
 - Character: An administrative commission under the Ministry of the Interior and Safety.
 - Composition: Up to 40 members, including one chairperson from the private sector at the vice-ministerial level.
 - Four subcommittees: Policy Participation, Deliberative Public Discourse, Democratic Citizenship Education, and Civil Society Revitalization.
 - Secretariat: Establishment of a secretariat to support the Commission's activities and handle administrative affairs.
 - Support organizations: Establishment of city/province civic participation commissions as administrative commissions, and city/county/district civic participation commissions or civic participation support centers, in order to strengthen organic cooperation and exchange between the central and local levels.
- Functions of the National Commission for Civic Participation
 - Formulation of master plans.
 - Monitoring and evaluation of the formulation and implementation of implementation plans.
 - Review and coordination of the execution and possible duplication of civic participation policies and projects.
 - Development of a comprehensive civic participation index, status surveys and evaluations, and institutional improvement.
 - Education, public outreach, and the establishment of cooperation systems to guarantee and activate civic participation.
 - Research and development of deliberative public discourse models, preparation of standard guidelines by type, and information management, analysis, and evaluation.

- Support for the operation of deliberative public discourse by the State and local governments.
- Monitoring of the operation of online civic participation platforms.
- Management and support of specialized educational institutions related to democratic citizenship education.
- Status surveys and establishment of statistics on civil society organizations.
- Capacity-building, including education and training for civil society actors.
- Requests for administrative and financial measures to ensure transparency and accountability in support for civil society public-interest activities.

〈 Structure of the National Commission for Civic Participation (Draft) 〉



Legislative Status

- Introduction of the Framework Act
 - The bill was introduced by Representative Lee Hae-sik on December 31, 2025.
- Current Status
 - The bill has been placed on the agenda of the Public Administration and Security Committee and is currently pending.
 - It is scheduled to be processed in the second half of 2026 by the latter half of the 24th National Assembly, which will be formed after the local elections.
- Civil Society Promotion Committee for the Establishment of the National Commission for Civic Participation
 - This civil society legislative promotion body was formed on December 17, 2025, upon the proposal of KCSN and Si-hwal-net, in order to reach agreement on the Framework Act on Civic Participation and ensure its prompt passage by the National Assembly.
 - A total of 120 civil society organizations nationwide are participating as of March 24, 2026.
 - Secretariat: Korea Civil Society Network (KCSN) <https://civilnet.net/>

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NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

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Focus Session

[Moderator]

Yu-kyung LEE | Independent International Correspondent

[Speech]

The Challenges Facing Venezuela in Achieving a Transition to True and Sustainable Democracy

Luis Carlos Diaz | Human Rights Defender, Journalist

[Speech]

Iran: Geopolitics of War, Prospects of Democratic Change

Siavash Saffari | Professor, Seoul National University

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[Focus Session]

Speech

The Challenges Facing Venezuela in Achieving a Transition to True and Sustainable Democracy



Luis Carlos Díaz

| Human Rights Defender, Journalist

Luis Carlos Díaz is a Venezuelan journalist, human rights defender, and digital rights activist. As co-founder of ReporteYa, he has led initiatives on citizen journalism, freedom of expression, counter-disinformation, and documenting state abuses, while serving on the board of Transparencia Venezuela and formerly as president of Internet Society. His work advancing democracy and human rights has received international recognition, including the 2024 Clooney Foundation for Justice Albie Award.

The Challenges Facing Venezuela in Achieving a Transition to True and Sustainable Democracy

Luis Carlos Diaz | Human Rights Defender, Journalist

Venezuela's current historical moment is not defined by the need to learn democracy, but by the far more complex task of rebuilding it. The central argument of this document is that Venezuelans possess a democratic memory and aspiration rooted in their own political history; however, they now face the unprecedented challenge of reconstructing democratic institutions under conditions of deep institutional collapse, social trauma, and entrenched authoritarian structures. This reconstruction is further complicated by a dual and often conflicting imperative: the need to ensure justice for systematic and grave human rights violations, while simultaneously enabling a political transition that has no clear precedent or blueprint.

At the core of this argument lies a critical hypothesis: Venezuela's transition cannot be understood as a simple rupture or replacement of political leadership, but as a prolonged and uncertain process of democratic reconstruction. Even events that appear decisive (such as the capture of Nicolás Maduro) do not, on their own, resolve the structural dynamics that sustain authoritarianism. Rather, they must be interpreted as moments within a broader trajectory shaped by decades of institutional erosion, political conflict, and adaptive authoritarian strategies.

A second key hypothesis challenges simplified narratives about Venezuela's past and present. The collapse of democracy is not attributed solely to Chavismo, but also to the accumulated failures of the pre-existing democratic model. Systemic corruption, a highly centralized state, and an oil-dependent economy created conditions of inequality and fragility that facilitated the rise of a political movement capable of dismantling democratic checks and balances from within. In this sense, authoritarianism is not treated as an external anomaly, but as a development rooted in unresolved structural weaknesses. This has profound implications for the future: any transition that merely seeks to restore the past without addressing these underlying conditions risks reproducing the same cycle of democratic breakdown.

The document situates Venezuela's crisis within a broader analytical framework that emphasizes the scale and nature of the damage inflicted over time. This is not described as a conventional political or economic crisis, but as a cumulative societal experience of trauma. Despite the absence of war or natural disaster, the country has undergone levels of economic contraction, mass migration, and social disintegration comparable to—or exceeding—those seen in armed conflicts. The loss of nearly a third

of the population through migration, alongside a dramatic collapse in GDP, signals not only material decline but also the fragmentation of social bonds, life trajectories, and national capacity.

A central argument emerging from this analysis is that sustained political decisions, when combined with concentrated power and lack of accountability, can produce devastation on a historic scale. This perspective challenges dominant international narratives that attribute Venezuela's crisis primarily to external pressures, such as sanctions or geopolitical tensions. While such factors are acknowledged, the document insists that they are insufficient to explain the depth of the collapse. Instead, it highlights the internal dynamics of authoritarian governance, including systemic corruption and the consolidation of illicit economies linked to political power.

Here, the text advances a particularly important hypothesis: in Venezuela, the boundaries between political authority, economic control, and criminal activity have become increasingly blurred. The emergence of networks associated with drug trafficking, illegal mining, and other illicit practices is not treated as incidental, but as structurally embedded within the logic of power. This fusion has enabled the extraction of resources while systematically excluding large segments of the population from decision-making processes. As a result, the crisis cannot be reduced to a matter of governance failure; it reflects a deeper transformation in which state structures are partially reoriented toward predatory and exclusionary practices.

The social consequences of this transformation are described in multidimensional terms. Hyperinflation, shortages, and the collapse of public services have severely degraded living conditions, but the document emphasizes that the impact extends beyond material deprivation. The notion of trauma is central: it encompasses not only repression and human rights violations, but also the erosion of expectations, the breakdown of community networks, and the loss of future horizons. This cumulative damage reinforces the argument that Venezuela's transition must involve not only institutional reform, but also moral and social reconstruction.

The question of justice occupies a pivotal place in this framework. The document argues that the scale and systematic nature of human rights violations—including arbitrary detention, torture, political persecution, and extrajudicial killings—create a fundamental dilemma for any transition process. On the one hand, the demand for justice is unavoidable, grounded in the experiences of victims and supported by extensive documentation from international bodies. On the other hand, the severity of these crimes complicates the possibility of political negotiation, as agreements that compromise justice risk undermining legitimacy and perpetuating impunity.

This leads to one of the document’s most significant analytical tensions: the coexistence of the need for justice and the practical requirements of political change. The hypothesis advanced here is that neither dimension can be subordinated to the other without generating new risks. A transition that sacrifices justice may stabilize the political system in the short term but leaves intact the structures and incentives that enabled abuse. Conversely, an uncompromising pursuit of justice without viable pathways for political exit may hinder the possibility of transition altogether. The challenge, therefore, lies in navigating this tension without emptying either justice or transition of their substantive meaning.

This dilemma is further complicated by the persistence of repressive structures. The document underscores that changes in leadership do not necessarily translate into systemic transformation. The apparatus of control, surveillance, and coercion remains largely intact, raising the possibility that authoritarian practices could continue under new configurations of power. This reinforces the argument that democratic transition must be understood not as a change of actors, but as a transformation of institutional logics.

The international dimension of the Venezuelan crisis adds another layer of complexity. The country’s situation has transcended national boundaries, affecting regional stability through migration and intersecting with transnational networks of corruption and illicit economies. In this context, external actors—particularly the United States—play a significant, albeit controversial, role. The document adopts a pragmatic stance: regardless of political perceptions, certain international actors possess the capacity to alter power dynamics within Venezuela. However, reliance on external pressure alone is insufficient and may even produce unintended consequences if not carefully aligned with internal processes.

A key argument here is that effective transition requires a combination of sustained international pressure and credible negotiation mechanisms. Yet this combination introduces its own tensions. Pressure can incentivize change but may also harden resistance, while negotiation can open pathways for transition but risks becoming a vehicle for impunity or political manipulation. The balance between these approaches is particularly difficult in a context where the costs of losing power are extraordinarily high for those in control.

The document also critically examines proposals that prioritize economic stabilization as a precursor to political reform. From a human rights perspective, this sequencing is problematic. Stability without institutional guarantees may reinforce authoritarian structures by restoring access to resources and enhancing external legitimacy without altering internal practices. The author therefore argues that the central question is not whether to prioritize stability or change, but what forms of stability are

compatible with genuine democratic transformation.

Within this broader framework, freedom of expression emerges as a foundational element of any meaningful transition. The ability to investigate, report, and express dissent without fear is presented as a key indicator of political openness. In the Venezuelan context, where media control and censorship have been pervasive, the restoration of this space is not a secondary outcome but a core component of democratic reconstruction. The document proposes the use of concrete indicators, such as the release of political prisoners and the lifting of information restrictions, to assess progress beyond formal political developments.

Ultimately, the text frames Venezuela’s transition as an open and unresolved process. It rejects deterministic or linear narratives in favor of a more contingent understanding shaped by competing forces, uncertain outcomes, and ongoing struggles. The concluding argument emphasizes that Venezuela does not begin from a blank slate, but from a combination of democratic memory and accumulated damage. This dual starting point requires a form of reconstruction that is both reflective and transformative.

The document closes by posing a series of questions rather than definitive answers, reinforcing its central premise that democratic transition is not a fixed endpoint but a process of continuous negotiation and learning. Among these questions are how to reconcile justice with political pragmatism, how to build lasting agreements in a fragmented society, and how to distinguish genuine transformation from adaptive authoritarianism. These questions extend beyond Venezuela, inviting reflection on the responsibilities of international actors and the broader challenges of supporting democratic transitions without oversimplification or instrumentalization.

In this sense, the final hypothesis is both analytical and normative: democracy is not only consolidated when it is achieved, but also when it is defended and shaped under conditions of uncertainty. Venezuela stands at precisely this juncture—between the exhaustion of an unsustainable system and the incomplete construction of a new one. The outcome remains uncertain, but the decisions made in this transitional moment will determine whether the country can break with its past or reproduce it in new forms.

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* Luis Carlos Diaz: Human rights defender, journalist, and communications consultant with 20 years of experience in cyberactivism, NGO advisory work, and digital community building. Venezuelan – Spanish. Prisoner of conscience for Amnesty International in 2019.

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[Focus Session]

Speech

Iran: Geopolitics of War, Prospects of Democratic Change



Siavash Saffari

| Professor, Seoul National University

Siavash Saffari is an Iranian-Canadian political scientist and a professor of West Asian Studies at Seoul National University. His academic publications include two books and more than twenty articles in the fields of Iranian political thought, Middle Eastern politics, and postcolonial studies. He is regular contributor to Korean and international media outlets.

Iran: Geopolitics of War, Prospects of Democratic Change

Siavash Saffari | Professor, Seoul National University

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a sweeping military assault on Iran, striking not only military targets but also energy infrastructure and civilian areas across the country. The scale and intensity of the bombing campaign quickly set it apart from most recent wars. Within days, entire neighborhoods were reduced to rubble, schools and hospitals were destroyed, and critical systems—oil facilities, power plants, and water infrastructure—were crippled. The result was not just immediate devastation but a deep, unfolding crisis threatening the basic conditions of life for millions.

This war did not emerge in isolation. It followed closely on the heels of a June 2025 attack in which Israeli strikes were joined by US bombers targeting Iranian nuclear facilities. Reports of close coordination between Washington and Tel Aviv, along with suggestions that diplomatic talks may have been used to buy time or mislead, cast a long shadow over claims that the conflict was unavoidable. Instead, the war appears as part of a deliberate and escalating campaign.

To understand why Iran has been targeted in this manner, one has to look beyond official justifications. For decades, the United States has sought to limit Iran's regional influence, particularly since the 1979 revolution that replaced a US-aligned monarchy with a new political order. From backing Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, to imposing severe economic sanctions, to launching cyberattacks and maintaining the constant threat of military action, Washington has pursued a strategy aimed at weakening Iran's autonomy and reshaping the regional balance of power.

Israel's role is closely tied to this broader strategy. As the only state in the region widely believed to possess nuclear weapons, it has long acted to prevent any potential rival from approaching similar capabilities. Iran's nuclear program, whatever its actual scope, is therefore treated not just as a security concern but as a challenge to an existing hierarchy. The demand that Iran remain permanently constrained, while Israel faces no comparable pressure, reflects a deeper asymmetry built into the regional order.

At the same time, the conflict cannot be separated from global rivalries. Iran's growing economic relationship with China, especially in the energy sector, has added a new layer of urgency to US policy. Weakening Iran could disrupt these ties and reinforce American influence over a region that remains central to global energy flows.

Yet to reduce the war to geopolitics alone is to miss something essential. Iran is not simply a battlefield or a strategic asset; it is a society marked by its own internal tensions and aspirations. Over the past two decades, waves of protest—from the Green Movement in 2009 to the Woman-Life-Freedom uprising in 2022—have revealed widespread dissatisfaction with economic inequality, political repression, and social restrictions. These movements are rooted in lived realities, not foreign agendas, and they point to a persistent desire for change from within.

War does not nurture such possibilities. History shows that external military intervention, even when framed as humanitarian, often produces the opposite of its stated aims. Rather than fostering democracy, it tends to fracture societies, empower hardline elements, and close off the space for internal reform. The devastation of countries like Iraq and Libya stands as a stark reminder.

What is unfolding in Iran today follows that same pattern. The bombs falling on cities and infrastructure are not clearing a path to freedom; they are burying the fragile, ongoing efforts of a society struggling to shape its own future. Any meaningful change in Iran, as in any country, will have to come from its people—not from the force of external destruction.

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Asia Democracy Session

Border Insecurity in Southeast Asia and the Crisis of Democracy

[Moderator]

Hee-suk KIM | Research Fellow, Jeonbuk National University Institute for Southeast Asian Studies

[Speech 1]

The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia Border Conflict and the Crisis of Democracy:
The Politicization of Security and the Reconfiguration of Governance

Ye-ji YOO | Researcher, Institute for East Asian Studies, Sogang University (SIEAS)

[Speech 2]

The Political Construction and Mobilization of Border Disputes: The Case of Cambodia

Jin-young PARK | Joint Research Fellow, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Jeonbuk National University

[Speech 3]

Freedom, Crime, Violence, and Resistance: The Duality of Myanmar's Borderlands

Jae-hyun PARK | Assistant Professor, Geppert School of International Studies, Sogang University

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[Asia Democracy Session]

Speech 1

The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia Border Conflict and the Crisis of Democracy : The Politicization of Security and the Reconfiguration of Governance



Ye-ji YOO

| Researcher, Institute for East Asian Studies, Sogang University (SIEAS)

Currently serves as a Research Fellow at the Institute for East Asian Studies at Sogang University. Received a Ph.D. from the Faculty of Social Sciences at Chiang Mai University with research on the political ecology of energy infrastructure conflicts, focusing on the Mae Moh coal-fired power plant in Lampang, Thailand. Research interests include energy development and conflict, environmental politics, and energy transition in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia Border Conflict and the Crisis of Democracy: The Politicization of Security and the Reconfiguration of Governance

Ye-ji YOO | Researcher, Institute for East Asian Studies, Sogang University (SIEAS)

1. Introduction

The year 2025 in Thailand was a period in which political instability and multiple crises overlapped. A series of developments—including the dismissal of Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra, the collapse of the coalition government, the formation of a transitional minority government, the dissolution of parliament, and the subsequent early general elections—revealed the structural vulnerabilities of Thai politics, where power formed through elections struggles to lead to stable governance (Yoo 2026). This political instability was further amplified as it intertwined with the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict. Armed clashes and rising tensions in the border area moved beyond mere diplomatic and security issues to stimulate nationalist sentiments, acting as a major variable in domestic politics. In this process, the role of the military expanded, and as public opinion demanding a hardline response was formed, changes in the political balance emerged. This trend led to the results of the general election on February 8, 2026, where the landslide victory of the conservative Bhumjaithai Party reflected a social preference for stability and order, while simultaneously showing a reduction in the political space for progressive and reformist forces represented by the People’s Party.

This study seeks to approach the Thailand–Cambodia border conflict not merely as an external security crisis, but as a political process that interacts with the domestic political order. In particular, it aims to analyze how the ‘security crisis frame’ connects with the reconstruction of political legitimacy in the process of merging with domestic politics. In this process, the military appears to have strengthened its image as the ‘guardian of the nation,’ and conservative political forces also seem to have adjusted their political positions within this discursive environment. This study intends to examine the mechanisms through which these changes were formed.

The structure of this paper is as follows: First, it examines the origins and progression of the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border conflict. Next, it analyzes the process by which the Thai military and conservative forces solidified their governance base amidst the crisis, focusing on three aspects: securing the military’s upper hand in civil–military relations, the spread of nationalist discourse and formation of public opinion, and the strengthening of the military’s image as the ‘guardian of the nation.’ Finally, it briefly discusses the implications of this analysis for Thai politics.

2. Origins and Development of the 2025 Thailand–Cambodia Border Conflict

The Thailand–Cambodia border dispute originated from unclearly defined borders established during the colonial era. While the 1904 and 1907 treaties intended to set the border based on the watershed of the Dangrek Mountains, a map produced by France in 1908 included the Preah Vihear Temple as Cambodian territory, becoming a core point of contention in the subsequent dispute. Although the International Court of Justice recognized Cambodia’s sovereignty in 1962, the debate over the legitimacy of the ruling continued. Since then, both countries have used different map standards and have failed to fully resolve the border demarcation issue, with significant sections remaining undefined despite consultations through a Joint Boundary Commission.

Within this background, the 2025 conflict was triggered by an incident in the Prasat Ta Muen Thom area, and tensions escalated rapidly following exchanges of fire and military casualties. Diplomatic consultations failed to produce substantial results, and the conflict escalated into a domestic political issue following the leak of a phone call between leaders. Subsequently, as large-scale armed clashes and civilian casualties occurred, the dispute expanded into a full-scale crisis, and instability persisted with repeated clashes despite a temporary ceasefire. In particular, the 2025 conflict was characterized by a significantly larger scale and intensity compared to the past, involving intense military clashes including airstrikes, resulting in massive casualties and resident evacuations. This moved beyond a simple territorial dispute to strengthen the perception of a security crisis across society and acted as a catalyst for the expansion of the military’s role and the rise of nationalist discourse, leading to the reconstruction of political legitimacy.

3. Political Utilization of a Security Crisis and Reconstruction of the Governance Base

1) Securing the Military’s Upper Hand in Civil–Military Relations

The 2025 Thailand–Cambodia border conflict was an instance that once again revealed the vulnerability of civilian control in Thai politics. During the conflict, the military carried out independent responses separate from the government and exerted influence on policy directions, clearly establishing a structure in which the military held the upper hand in civil–military relations. This trend had already appeared in 2024 when the Navy Commander publicly denied a maritime border agreement approved by the government and claimed sovereignty over Koh Kood, demonstrating that the military could express independent positions even on diplomatic matters.

During the 2025 conflict, this trend was further strengthened. The military raised diplomatic protests without consulting the government and continued a hardline response contrary to the government’s de-escalation stance, even independently implementing border control measures. Conversely, the leak of Prime Minister Paetongtarn’s informal phone call undermined the government’s credibility and

intensified the political crisis, eventually leading to the collapse of the government. In this process, the military secured the legitimacy of its hardline response to strengthen its political position, and public support from the monarchy also reinforced this. Consequently, this conflict reaffirmed the structure where the military emerges as a core actor in policy decision-making and execution in crisis situations, serving to further solidify the asymmetry of civil-military relations and the military's upper hand.

2) Mobilization of Nationalist Discourse and Formation of Public Opinion

The expansion of military influence during the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict unfolded in a way that secured social legitimacy by combining with nationalist discourse. Moving beyond traditional briefings, the military actively utilized social media to organize emotional mobilization and collective solidarity, centered on a hashtag campaign: 'Thailand loves peace, but is not afraid of war' (#ไทยนี้รักสงบแต่ถึงรบไม่ขลาด). The Army, Navy, and Air Force repeatedly spread messages of combat readiness and military support to induce public participation, and this 'hashtag politics' quickly spread to conservative parties, strengthening the hardline nationalist discourse across the political spectrum.

Public opinion was also reshaped in response. In a June poll by the National Institute of Development Administration (NIDA), trust in the military reached approximately 86%, while trust in the government and Ministry of Foreign Affairs appeared low, and about 88% agreed with the military's core message: 'Thailand loves peace, but is not afraid of war.' Following the July clashes, trust in the military rose to about 95% and government distrust intensified, reinforcing this trend. Simultaneously, while preferring a diplomatic solution, the public showed significant support for hardline responses such as economic pressure or military buildup. In terms of perceptions of Cambodia, views distrusting or viewing Cambodia as hostile increased overwhelmingly, and nationalist sentiment spread throughout society.

3) Strengthening the Military's Image as 'Guardian of the Nation'

The 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict served as an opportunity to once again strengthen the image of the military as the 'guardian of the nation,' moving beyond the mere expansion of influence. Prior to the conflict, criticism of the military—particularly among youth and reformist forces—held a certain degree of force.

However, as the security crisis escalated, such criticism weakened, and the image of the military as a 'guardian' resurfaced. The military presented itself as an entity devoted to protecting national interests, and this moral authority influenced the legitimacy of policy choices beyond simple symbolism. Consequently, moderate solutions such as joint development or negotiations were criticized as 'betrayal,' narrowing the political space and making a flexible approach to territorial issues increasingly difficult.

This process further solidified the existing power alliance between the monarchy, military, and conservative parties. Conservative parties actively responded to the military's nationalist campaign and shared security-centered messages, creating an atmosphere where it was difficult for even members of the ruling coalition to acknowledge mutual responsibility for territorial issues. Simultaneously, military-critical forces began to adjust their positions. A representative example is Pita Limjaroenrat, former leader of the Move Forward Party, the predecessor of the People's Party, publicly apologized for past critical remarks about the military, reflecting the reality that security issues had emerged as the central political agenda. Consequently, the 2025 border conflict functioned as a catalyst to strengthen not only the military's institutional influence but also its symbolic legitimacy, shrinking the space for military-critical discourse compared to before.

4. Conclusion

This study analyzed how the Thai military and conservative forces formed the conditions for consolidating their governance base during the progression of the 2025 Thailand-Cambodia border conflict. In particular, it examined how the role of the military and the surrounding discourse and public opinion were restructured as the diplomatic and security crisis became intertwined with the domestic political order.

The analysis results show that the border conflict acted as a catalyst for changing the environment of political competition beyond a simple military clash. During the conflict, the military emerged as the core actor in crisis response, expanding its institutional influence while securing legitimacy through the spread of nationalist discourse. Simultaneously, the image of the military as the 'guardian of the nation' was brought to the forefront again amidst the security crisis, and critical discourse against the military gradually became more constrained. These changes acted as a condition for redefining the range of strategies and statements available to political actors.

This analysis demonstrates that a security crisis does not merely act as a temporary political variable, but can reconstruct the very conditions of competition and relations between actors. In particular, the case of Thailand highlights that the military's influence is not limited to the institutional level but operates simultaneously in the realms of discourse, public opinion, and political legitimacy.

However, the question of how the mechanisms identified in this study will persist or change in the subsequent political process remains open. Although conservative parties achieved a landslide victory in the February 2026 general election, further analysis is needed to determine whether the nationalist discourse and power relations strengthened in the specific crisis situation of the border conflict will become entrenched in the long term or readjusted as circumstances change.

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[Asia Democracy Session]

Speech 2

The Political Construction and Mobilization of Border Disputes : The Case of Cambodia



Jin-young PARK

| Joint Research Fellow, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Jeonbuk National University

Previously served as Program Manager for the Korea–ASEAN Cooperation Fund at the Korean Association of Southeast Asian Studies, Head of Research and International Solidarity at the Korean Women Workers Association, Program Officer at the Asian Women Workers Association, and Asia Program Coordinator at the Working Women’s Academy. Received a Ph.D. from Cornell University with comparative research on the impact of the international community on institutional changes in labor relations in Cambodia and Myanmar.

The Political Construction and Mobilization of Border Disputes : The Case of Cambodia

Jin-young PARK | Joint Research Fellow, Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, Jeonbuk National University

The 2025 border dispute between Cambodia and Thailand is closely linked to Cambodia’s domestic political situation, beyond the progression of the dispute itself. In this article, the border dispute is regarded not as a simple security crisis, but as a political project selectively planned and managed by the authoritarian regime to manage its legitimacy crisis and solidify hereditary power. Through this perspective, we will examine how Cambodia’s domestic political situation politicized the border conflict.

Domestic Political Situation in Cambodia

Regarding the Hun Manet government, which marked its second anniversary in August 2025, Cambodia’s Khmer Times quoted experts claiming it achieved meaningful success through bold measures such as political stability, economic growth, job creation, and infrastructure expansion including airports and canals (Vibol 2025). Conversely, foreign media such as The Diplomat evaluated that Cambodia “declined” during the same period. Some of the reforms expected by Western-educated prime minister failed, the economy remains unable to create jobs outside the garment industry, and authoritarianism, corruption, and human rights suppression persist while structural problems such as cyber scam compounds deepen (Coffey & Conochie 2025).

Such contrasting evaluations also represent differences in perspectives on the situation. For example, while it is true that the economy is growing steadily and infrastructure construction plays a role, it is difficult to ignore inherent problems such as slowing growth and increasing household and foreign debt. Cambodia’s ‘political stability’ is the result of silencing critical voices through the suppression of the opposition and control of independent media. This inevitably entails conditions such as human rights suppression and democratic backsliding. These “time bombs” inherent in the political and economic achievements touted by the Hun Manet government have placed a burden on the Cambodian government. Furthermore, the problem of cyber scam centers, which began to receive intensive international attention from 2024, also began to act as a pressure. The 2025 border conflict with Thailand served as an opportunity in this context to divert domestic public attention to external

threats through nationalist rhetoric, and was utilized as a momentum to bypass and suppress criticism regarding the democratic crisis and human rights issues facing the regime.

Origins and Progression of the Border Crisis

The border dispute surrounding the sovereignty of the Preah Vihear Temple, located on the Cambodia–Thailand border, has its roots in the colonial era. The 1904 and 1907 Franco–Siamese treaties agreed to determine the border based on the Dangrek Mountains, but the ‘Annex I map’ border drawn by the colonial authorities was inconsistent with this agreement. At the time, the Thai government did not officially take issue with the map errors, and French Cambodia managed the area as its own territory. After Cambodia’s independence, the conflict over the temple and the surrounding 4.6km² led to a lawsuit at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in 1959. In 1962, the ICJ ruled that the temple belonged to Cambodian territory, but the boundaries of the surrounding areas remained unclear, acting as a spark for border disputes combined with the nationalist politics of both countries ever since. In 2008, after Cambodia unilaterally registered the temple as a UNESCO World Heritage site, protests and demonstrations within Thailand, border crossings, and military standoffs/artillery duels between the two armies followed, resulting in several armed clashes and tens of thousands of refugees between 2008 and 2011. In 2011, the conflict temporarily subsided as both countries reached a ceasefire under ASEAN mediation, but the area remained in an “unstable ceasefire state” due to continued distrust over discussions on demilitarized zones and the installation of monitoring bodies. In this process, the vicinity of Preah Vihear emerged as a symbolic space utilized by political leaders in both countries to stimulate nationalism for domestic support mobilization (Wagner 2011).

The first clash that occurred on the Cambodia–Thailand border in February 2025 was limited in terms of military exchange itself, but soon became the prelude to a full-scale crisis where the diplomacy, security, and domestic politics of both countries intersected. Although a ceasefire agreement was reached in July, full-scale armed clashes including artillery and airstrikes broke out again in December, causing dozens of casualties and hundreds of thousands of refugees, reaffirming that the border dispute is an ‘open conflict’ that can reignite at any time. In a meeting between the two countries on December 24, an agreement was made to exercise mutual restraint in further engagement and consultations for easing tensions,

but regardless of the meeting results, it was revealed that the possibility of political utilization of the dispute remains high as both sides continued to use hardline rhetoric and military displays, conscious of their domestic public opinion. While Thai media and politicians defined Cambodia as an ‘aggressor’ that invaded their territory and violated the ceasefire due to border skirmishes and drone incidents, the Cambodian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and media continued to trade accusations over responsibility,

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criticizing Thailand's military activities and construction of military structures as 'acts of aggression' that violated the 2000 Memorandum of Understanding and subsequent agreements.

Politicization of the Border Crisis

The Cambodian government actively politicized this border crisis. First, the Cambodian government pursued a diplomatic strategy of appealing to the international community using international organizations. As Cambodian soldiers died and numerous casualties occurred in the skirmish with Thailand, the Cambodian government and Senate President Hun Sen repeatedly claimed that the area was Cambodian territory according to the Franco-Siamese treaties (1904, 1907), Annex I map, and the 1962 and 2013 ICJ rulings, and publicly stated their policy to resolve the border dispute by referring it to the ICJ rather than through bilateral negotiations (Park Jung-yeon 2025). More importantly, this decision was intended for domestic public opinion.

In other words, it functioned as a political event projecting an image that the Hun Manet government is strongly protecting national interests beyond simple diplomatic and legal procedures. In terms of messaging, Prime Minister Hun Manet emphasized that referring the case to the ICJ was a "choice to peacefully resolve a conflict with high risk of complex and armed clash according to international law," and sought to build an image as a responsible actor skillfully utilizing international norms and multilateral organizations. On the side of mass mobilization, large-scale solidarity marches and rallies supporting the government's response were organized in Phnom Penh and major cities immediately after the ICJ referral, and fundraising activities and campaigns to send food, water, equipment, and medical supplies to support soldiers stationed at the border and their families were extensively carried out. The rally held on June 18 was named the 'Solidarity March' supporting the government's efforts to resolve border issues, and it was recorded that more than 150,000 people participated. The Cambodian government described the soldiers defending the border as "heroic and brave," while the actions of the citizens supporting them were framed as "patriotic generosity," emphasizing national solidarity (Khmer Times 2025/07/26).

This nationalist sentiment exploded in social media spaces in the second half of 2025. In Cambodia, the 'Boycott Thai Products' movement targeting Thai products and brands spread, and posts showing participation in the boycott of PTT gas stations, Cafe Amazon, and Thai beverages/household items were shared on SNS. Emotional disputes over history, culture, and territory frequently occurred under hashtags such as 'Khmer Loves Khmer' and 'Respect Our Border'. As hateful expressions tying Cambodians to 'illegal immigrants', 'drugs', and 'scam participants' increased in Thailand as well, concerns grew that an 'online nationalist war' between the two countries was intensifying along with the border clashes (Koh Ewe 2025). These aspects were linked to military skirmishes at the border,

large-scale rallies and support campaigns in the capital, and the outbreak of boycotts/hate on SNS, forming a multi-layered nationalist mobilization structure where offline violence and online discourse interlocked.

Political Effects of the Border Dispute

Through such politicization of the border dispute, Cambodia is evaluated to have achieved the effect of silencing critical voices, strengthening internal cohesion, and reaffirming popular support for the Hun family's rule (Strangio 2025). In the process, other members of the Hun family also actively intervened, revealing that the family's power structure extends across diplomacy, security, and administration to youth and nationalist mobilization. Prime Minister Hun Manet played a diplomatic role utilizing border management through multilateral organizations and coordination mechanisms within the UN and ASEAN. Secondly, Hun Manet, as the Director of the Intelligence Department of the Ministry of National Defense, has been directing military intelligence operations since obtaining a master's degree in intelligence-related studies in the US, and is known to have functioned as a key security strategist monitoring the border situation 24 hours a day during the border dispute with Thailand. Lastly, Hun Manet, as the Minister of Public Service and Deputy Prime Minister, was in charge of mass mobilization. He has been leading nationalist mobilization and patriotic campaigns based on the ruling party's youth organization (UYFC: Union of Youth Federations of Cambodia), and was a figure who had carried out long-term projects to absorb the youth support base of the opposition when opposition leader Sam Rainsy enjoyed high popularity among the youth. In June 2025, he led the nationwide solidarity march and youth mobilization campaign under the pretext of military support and inspiring patriotism (The Nation 2025/06/18).

Furthermore, the leak of the recorded phone call that occurred in mid-June is an example showing that Hun Sen's influence remains. Part of an unreleased call between Hun Sen and Thai Prime Minister Paetongtarn Shinawatra was released in an edited form by the Cambodian side. Hun Sen likely intended to refute Thailand's claims by citing "truth and transparency" through parts of the call, while simultaneously strengthening his image as a "protector of the Khmer people" and a tough, experienced negotiator within the country. While in Thailand, this triggered a political crisis surrounding the Pheu Thai government's responsibility for security and territorial defense, leading to the collapse of the coalition, large-scale resignation protests, and the impeachment of the Prime Minister, in Cambodia, it shows the significant weight of 'elder' Hun Sen's political influence and informal channels in diplomatic and security decision-making (Park Jin-young 2025).

This visualized the hereditary power maintenance and adjustment process of the Hun family members by dividing and taking charge of different areas (diplomacy, security, administration, mobilization).

In this way, the border dispute was used as an opportunity to re-mobilize support for the hereditary system and functioned as part of a governance strategy to convert internal criticism and socio-economic discontent into nationalist mobilization against an external enemy (Vann 2025).

Conclusion

The 2025 Cambodia–Thailand border dispute was a continuation of long-standing sovereignty conflicts over Preah Vihear and the border, but at the same time, it was a political crisis planned and amplified to manage the crises and contradictions faced by the Hun Manet–Hun Sen regime. By integrating the Hun family’s power structure through divided roles in diplomacy, security, administration, and mass mobilization, they succeeded in re-mobilizing support for the hereditary system by combining the image of a ‘responsible actor’ utilizing international organizations with large-scale nationalist mobilization. In this process, the border functioned not just as a simple territorial boundary, but as a governance infrastructure to divert internal criticism and socio-economic discontent to external enemies. However, the strategy of using external enemies to overcome regime crises can always turn into a backlash. In particular, structural problems within Cambodia, such as economic vulnerability, cyber scams, corruption, and human rights violations, can only be temporarily hidden through the temporary enthusiasm of the border dispute. This is because the politicization of the border crisis can delay the fundamental legitimacy crisis but cannot solve it. Furthermore, the memories of mutual hatred and violence left in both societies by the exclusive and aggressive nationalism surrounding the border dispute raise questions about how the future Cambodia–Thailand relationship can be reconstructed.

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NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

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[Asia Democracy Session]

Speech 3

Freedom, Crime, Violence, and Resistance: The Duality of Myanmar's Borderlands



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Freedom, Crime, Violence, and Resistance : The Duality of Myanmar’s Borderlands

Jae-hyun PARK | Assistant Professor, Geppert School of International Studies, Sogang University

Introduction

Recently, the Myanmar borderlands have been defined as a space where instability and crime are concentrated, and they have been treated as a core problem area in regional security discourse. Since the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, these areas, which have become unstable due to civil war, are regions where international criminal organizations seeking to exploit this instability are rampant. International criminal activities such as drug trafficking, human trafficking, and online romance scams are described as turning the area into a crime zone that causes great harm to security in the Asia-Pacific region.

However, the borderlands have functioned not only as a place of crime but have also served as a home for people who have long resisted in pursuit of a better Myanmar. In this way, international criminal activities and socio-political resistance exist simultaneously in the borderlands, and these actions coexist, creating a unique space where they overlap.

This presentation aims to focus on the inherent ‘lawlessness’ of the borderlands and argue that crime and resistance movements coexist and overlap because they share the spatial characteristic of lawlessness. The lawlessness of the borderlands, which arises from the limits of state control, opens up a range of possibilities different from areas under consolidated state control. In that place, the state, whose control has reached its limit, and non-state actors seeking to escape state control intertwine to create actions and rules imbued with the unique duality of the borderlands.

Furthermore, this presentation highlights those who have plunged into this duality in search of the values of resistance and freedom. It explores how the Myanmar borderlands, which are often consumed as sensational news and easily overlooked, function as a bastion of resistance to create a better Myanmar.

Characteristics of the Borderlands as a Space

The ambivalence of the borderlands stems from the structural limits of state control. State power, held by a national government or a force that has seized state governing institutions, shows a ‘gradation’ of power projection that gradually weakens from the center to the periphery. In other words, while the state can exercise surveillance systems and regulatory power tightly woven around the capital and

provincial hubs, it is difficult to maintain the same level of control in remote border areas or wilderness far from cities.

Under these conditions, borderlands naturally remain as zones of weak state control. The borderland is a space located at the end of each country’s power, as a frontier where two or more countries meet. As a result, the borderland becomes an area where the state’s surveillance and rules are not fully projected. This presentation defines this characteristic of the borderlands as ‘lawlessness.’ And just as the taste and shape of fruit change depending on the soil, actors operating in an environment where lawlessness is clearly revealed adapt to that environment and create unique rules and their own scope of action—that is, a “menu of possibilities” suitable for it.

Therefore, an environment thick with lawlessness constitutes a range of possibilities different from areas under consolidated state control. First, the lawlessness of the borderlands opens a ‘window of opportunity’ that makes it possible for non-state actors to resist state power more publicly and to do things that are difficult to realize within state control. Second, lawlessness makes the state’s authority to control itself a subject of negotiation. As mentioned earlier, non-state actors can secure power and influence at a level comparable to the state in the borderlands, and as a result, the state becomes unable to suppress non-state actors through force. In this situation, the state enters into negotiations with non-state actors regarding the method and scope of the exercise of control in order to secure even a little more control over its territory (Migdal 1988).

Lastly, this negotiation process can create logic and rules unique to the borderlands that are quite different from the rules and logic prevailing in areas under consolidated state control.

The Dance of Criminals, Resisters, and Those Who Stole the State: The Logic and Rules of Lawlessness

Therefore, the context in which international criminal groups established criminal complexes in the Myanmar borderlands and the emergence of armed resistance by youth aiming for ethnic liberation and federal democracy can be understood within the same category of possibilities. Both criminal organizations and resistance forces needed a space where state control was weak, and they moved to the borderlands looking for the same conditions despite having different purposes.

Criminal complexes formed along the Thai-Myanmar border have moved in search of looser gaps in control to avoid the surveillance and checks of strengthening state control. International criminal groups began to move their bases to Myanmar from regions such as the Philippines and Cambodia to avoid state crackdowns (Tower and Clapp 2020).

In other words, international criminal organizations moved to the Myanmar borderlands looking for a space that could fit within the ‘range of possibilities’ as state regulatory pressure intensified.

In spatial terms, the movement of international criminal groups toward areas of weak state control resembles the flight of Myanmar’s anti-military resistance forces to the borderlands. Myanmar’s Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) have continued armed struggles based in the borderlands since Burma’s independence. Student activists who escaped the threat of bloody suppression and arrest by the military in urban areas also headed for the borderlands where state control is weak and rival forces opposed to the state are present. All of them sought out places where control was weak after being pushed by state power, just like international criminal organizations.

Meanwhile, the Myanmar military also exists as a competitor at the same level among them. The military used a strategy to gradually weaken competitors in the borderlands by establishing ceasefire arrangements with EAOs in the borderlands to preserve room for negotiation to secure greater control later (Bertrand et al. 2022; Park 2025, 66). In the Myanmar borderlands, a unique dual logic and rules are created in the same soil of lawlessness, quite different from those in areas under consolidated state control. Most notably, in this place where the state’s control is limited, all political actors implicitly share the responsibilities and powers that the state should originally monopolize, such as taxation, conscription, and the provision of public services.

In this way, rules and possibilities necessary for achieving the goals of actors in the borderlands are constructed and operate differently from those in areas under consolidated state control. For example, many of the criminal complexes in the Thai-Myanmar borderlands have been maintained under the tacit consent or protection of the Myanmar military. Furthermore, the military leadership condones criminal activities such as the cultivation and distribution of drugs by pro-military militias and criminal organizations in exchange for a share of the criminal proceeds. These are things that would not be tolerated in areas under consolidated state control due to human rights violations and the deterioration of regional security, but they are tolerated in the borderlands for the military’s strategic and material gains.

Resistance forces for federal democracy and ethnic liberation also commit various acts that are not easily tolerated in areas under consolidated state control to achieve their goals, and show a relatively flexible attitude toward such acts. In particular, there is no great hesitation in possessing and using the capacity to use violence. An officer from the KIO (Kachin Independence Organization) said in an interview with a confident tone, “Whoever holds the gun is the strongest.” This clearly illustrates what the value of power is in the borderlands.

In fact, power in the borderlands leads to securing economic interests. Many EAOs create revenue by imposing tariffs on imports and exports that seek to avoid the state’s official tariff system and customs surveillance for various reasons. At the same time, power enables negotiations through violent acts in the borderlands. In the Myanmar borderlands, combat is used as a process of negotiating the status, rights, and responsibilities among actors, and one cannot participate in this negotiation process without trained armed forces and ammunition. Some EAOs have maintained a so-called ‘hostile symbiotic relationship’ with the military while maintaining a confrontational structure and engaging in armed conflict (Park 2025). On one hand, they maintain a confrontational structure with the military, but on the other hand, they communicate closely with the military for maintaining power and distributing interests in the borderlands. In this structure, armed conflict and the process of settling armed conflict are treated as a means of negotiation between actors in the borderlands.

‘We do what we must for the nation. That is our mission.’

While crime and resistance, enabled by the shared root of lawlessness, are intertwined, what is the reason why many members of borderland communities support the resistance forces? It is likely because the resistance forces, surviving and taking root within this lawless environment, are positioned as alternative state forces that can replace the state while confronting the Myanmar military. Even if what we may subjectively judge to be right or wrong are mixed and intertwined due to lawlessness, resistance forces like EAOs bear the responsibilities that the state should properly shoulder, such as education, health, and development, in spaces where state control reaches its limit. In this sense, they are replacing the state and positioning themselves as a bastion for creating a better Myanmar.

Furthermore, no matter how much those resistance forces are intertwined with the military and international criminal groups, it is because the sacrifices and efforts of the individuals who make up the resistance forces support the resistance against the military and the hope for a better future. Even now, many young people in the borderlands are likely still fighting against the military and serving their communities. They have jumped into the Myanmar borderlands, hoping that they will be the last generation to live under military dictatorship and civil war.

Solving the Myanmar crisis must begin with understanding the complexity of the borderlands. Only when we understand the duality of this space and take seriously the socio-political orders operating within it can we create sustainable peace and a better democracy in Myanmar together with the citizens of Myanmar.

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Special Session

Time to FLIP THE HOUSE

[Moderator]

Karel Galang | Senior Program Officer, Asisa Democracy Network

[Thematic Presentation 1]

How to Confront Extremism Root in Anxiety: Power Polarization, Wealth Inequality, and Social Division in Korea

Hyung-nam KIM | Political think tank VALID Co-representative

[Thematic Presentation 2]

Elections in Asia: Strengthening Electoral Integrity in Challenging Democratic Contexts

Brizza Rosales | Executive Director, ANFREL (Asian Network for Free Elections)

[Speech 1]

From Youth Protest to Mass Uprising: A Generational Awakening

Saleh Uddin Sifat | Joint Member Secretary of National Citizen Party

[Speech 2]

The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities in Indonesia

Cho Yong Gi | Undergraduate Student of Department of Philosophy of Universitas Indonesia, Street Paramedic

[Speech 3]

The Reality Facing Mexican Youth and the Solidarity Housing Movement

: Young People Choosing to Build a Life Together

Jung-hwa Yeon | Ph.D Candidate of Political Science, JBNU

[Speech 4]

Between Resistance and Survival: The Struggles and Aspirations of Myanmar Youth Post-Coup

Shwe Yamin Aye | Department of Political Science, Graduate School, Jeonbuk National University

[Speech 5]

The Direction of the Thai Civil Society Amidst Global Movements

Sirapob Phumphungphut | Former political prisoner, Activist of Ratsadon 2020 Movement

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Thematic Presentation 1

How to Confront Extremism Root in Anxiety : Power Polarization, Wealth Inequality, and Social Division in Korea



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How to Confront Extremism Root in Anxiety : Power Polarization, Wealth Inequality, and Social Division in Korea

Hyung-nam KIM | Political think tank VALID Co-representative

1. Introduction: From Generational Turnover to a Shift in Worldview

In a rapidly changing world, we have learned through numerous historical experiences that when politics fails to keep pace with change, many people are pushed to the margins of society, forced to hover between suffering and death. A representative example in Korea is the 1997 foreign exchange crisis, when Korea applied for an IMF bailout. It was a crisis of national bankruptcy, faced head-on amid the waves of globalization and free trade, while the political and economic order formed during the era of developmental dictatorship remained unreformed.

The idea of generational turnover—that the faces of those who hold political power must change and that political power must pass into the hands of a younger generation in order to respond actively to a rapidly changing world—is a phrase frequently heard in countries around the world. Korea is no exception. Yet, naturally, the generational turnover of political power is not easy. Many young people attempt to enter politics based on the agendas they have worked on or studied, but many end up facing failure. Even when they do enter politics, they often fail to work in their fields of interest or expertise and are reduced to appendages of established politicians. At times, they face severe political hardship while challenging the vested interests of established politicians. Why is this?

The term “youth politics” began to appear in earnest in Korea around the 2012 general elections. Fifteen years have passed since then. It has been a period in which we have painfully realized that the mere fact of outstanding individuals entering politics does not easily lead to a transfer of power.

Politics is not something one can do alone. There may be “players” who run in elections and seek public office, but without a team, it is difficult to accomplish anything. Here, a team does not simply mean a collection of people. The basic requirement for a political team or political association is a “worldview.” Even if power were handed over tomorrow, the power to interpret and define events in the world comes from a worldview. Therefore, what must be replaced for political change is not the “generation” but the “worldview.” In the process of replacing the worldview, the generation will naturally be replaced as well.

Political Think Tank VALID is an organization formed to create a new worldview that can lead Korean society. VALID was formed not simply to bring together capable individuals, but to create a new scene

in Korean politics through a progressive worldview built and shared collectively. It was first established in August 2023 as a political think tank of youth activists, politicians, researchers, and entrepreneurs in their 20s and 30s acting under the motto of “Democracy in Forward Motion.”

The name “VALID” contains the determination to achieve valid progress for the democracy of the next generation, and stands for “Victory And Love In Democracy.” To design a sustainable future, we are developing policies and conducting campaigns at home and abroad centered on six major agendas: “Digital Transformation,” “Sustainable Economic Growth,” “Social Safety Net,” “Climate Crisis,” “Establishing a New Foreign Policy and National Security Orientation,” and “Labor.” Ultimately, we are working to secure the political capacity to lead a comprehensive shift in worldview and generational leadership within Korea’s political ecosystem.

2. The Landscape of Division Created by the December 3 Emergency Martial Law and Insurrection

On December 7, 2024, one year and four months after VALID began its activities, one million Korean citizens gathered in front of the National Assembly building in Yeouido. This was because an impeachment motion against President Yoon Suk-yeol—who had declared emergency martial law by mobilizing the military four days earlier, on December 3, only for the attempt to be thwarted—had been tabled at the plenary session of the National Assembly. They shouted with one voice, “Yoon Suk-yeol Must Step Down Immediately.”

However, the impeachment motion was rejected because members of the ruling People Power Party collectively left the chamber, and the quorum required for a vote was not met. From that day on, citizens surrounded the headquarters of the People Power Party every day and held protests, while protest calls and egg-throwing continued at the offices of the party’s lawmakers. On December 14, the day of the vote on the second impeachment motion, two million people gathered in Yeouido. Public opinion was overwhelmingly in favor of impeachment. Under overwhelming public pressure, ruling party lawmakers participated in the vote, and finally the impeachment motion was passed, thereby suspending President Yoon Suk-yeol from office. That night, Yeouido became a festival site, no different from a K-pop concert venue.

One hundred and eleven days later, on April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court delivered its ruling on the impeachment of President Yoon Suk-yeol. The scene in front of the Constitutional Court was quite different from Yeouido 111 days earlier. Police riot squads surrounded and protected the Constitutional Court in layers; pedestrian traffic was prohibited nearby, and all building rooftops were sealed off. This was due to a series of terrorist threats against the Constitutional Court by Yoon Suk-yeol supporters.

In the streets, with police barricades between them, citizens shouting “Remove Yoon Suk-yeol” were gathered on one side, while citizens shouting “Bring Yoon Suk-yeol Back” held protests on the other. Only four months had passed, but the appearance of the streets had completely changed. Unlike the scene in front of the National Assembly in Yeouido, where millions of citizens had sung in relief after the impeachment motion passed, what the scene in front of the Constitutional Court revealed on the day of the impeachment ruling was the “division” of Korean society.

3. How Yoon Suk-yeol Divided Korean Society

The essence of the “December 3 Insurrection” led by Yoon Suk-yeol is that a political leader declared that violence can be a legitimate means of achieving political goals. It was the unleashing of a force no Korean political leader had dared to touch since democratization in 1987. Therefore, those who support Yoon Suk-yeol’s declaration of emergency martial law are qualitatively different from ordinary conservative voters. There may be many social and political reasons for supporting a politician, but supporting the logic that the use of armed force is acceptable to achieve political goals is a different level of political expression. It amounts to a total denial of the democratic republic system. This is an extremely serious matter. A political leader can be removed from office through impeachment, but there is no way to stop the process by which supporters captured by anti-democratic political logic continue to grow in strength.

During the 111 days from the passage of the impeachment motion to the impeachment ruling, Korean citizens frequently witnessed the basic norms of society collapse with alarming ease. Even while suspended from office, Yoon Suk-yeol did not hesitate to spread all manner of false propaganda in an attempt to regain power. He repeatedly spread groundless conspiracy theories, such as the claim that “the Korean opposition party and the National Election Commission colluded with the Chinese government to manipulate the election management system and commit election fraud,” and claimed that his declaration of emergency martial law was legitimate. He argued that the country was on the verge of being handed over to China and that he therefore had no choice but to mobilize the military. Of course, this was a baseless and absurd lie.

The justification for martial law put forward by Yoon Suk-yeol differed in logic and nature from the arguments used in the past by Korea’s conservative camp to suppress the liberal camp. The target Yoon Suk-yeol defined as the “enemy” was not North Korea but China. This was a new form of McCarthyism that reworked the old “pro-North Korea” frame. The insurrection forces designed the logic of the insurrection by precisely targeting anti-China sentiment already circulating widely in Korean society, thereby making it more easily spreadable.

The election fraud theory began to spread indiscriminately as it was reproduced through waves of fake news. Representative examples include rumors that those who joined the protests calling for Yoon Suk-yeol’s resignation were Chinese, or that Chinese people were buying up all the real estate in Korea. Amid this flow, Yoon Suk-yeol’s approval rating began to rise even while his duties were suspended, and some radical supporters even created an unprecedented crisis, forming a group to raid and destroy a court in the early morning with the intent to harm the judge who had issued an arrest warrant for Yoon Suk-yeol.

Fortunately, on April 4, 2025, the Constitutional Court unanimously removed Yoon Suk-yeol from the presidency. Yoon Suk-yeol has since been sentenced to life imprisonment by the trial court and is currently imprisoned, but the seeds of division and extremism he left behind are still spreading like poisonous mushrooms online and offline.

Until then, Korea had been considered a political environment in which extremist forces have found it difficult to enter the mainstream. For that reason, the shock citizens felt at the sight of these groups taking shape in real life, destroying a court, threatening the Constitutional Court with terrorism, and repeatedly holding intimidating rallies was considerable.

What was especially shocking was that those actively responding to Yoon Suk-yeol’s extremist incitement were not limited to the elderly generation traditionally associated with Korean conservatism. In the Yoon Suk-yeol support group known as “Yoon-Again,” people in their 20s and 30s play various roles and occupy a visible presence. They visit neighborhoods where Chinese residents live to hold threatening protests, turn blatant hate speech into chants and songs, and mock people who look at them with discomfort by asking whether they are Chinese. Among teenagers, far-right incitement is even spreading in online spaces as a form of online youth culture.

Korean political circles and the media describe this phenomenon as the far-right turn among people in their 20s and 30s. On the one hand, some strongly criticize them and define them as “a generation beyond repair.” On the other hand, others dismiss it as a phenomenon that will naturally disappear once people in their 20s and 30s grow older and “come to their senses.” Yet it is difficult to find serious analysis or alternatives that explain why people in their 20s and 30s are accepting Yoon Suk-yeol’s absurd lies, or why the logic of hatred toward neighboring great powers spreads so easily.

4. Division Begins with “Anxiety”

Hatred toward China is, in fact, closer to fear. Despite China being a very important trading partner for Korea, Koreans do not welcome China’s expansion and growth because of geography, history, varied personal experiences, and the fact that China is an ally of North Korea. Yoon Suk-yeol’s extremist incitement cleverly exploits this perception. The claim that China is taking over Korea through “election fraud” is even connected to the frame that Chinese people are inflating prices by buying up Korean residential real estate with massive financial power, causing social problems such as youth unemployment and deepening polarization. It is a typical method of far-right incitement to blame social anxiety on “outsiders.” The fact that people in their 20s and 30s are responding to such incitement means that significant social anxieties have accumulated among people in their 20s and 30s, and that Korean politics has not responded effectively to these problems.

In 2022, the voter turnout for the Seoul mayoral election in Seoul, Korea’s capital, was 53 percent, while turnout among those in their 20s and 30s remained in the 30 percent range. Half of the citizens did not go to the polls, and seven out of ten young people did not cast a vote for Seoul’s future. Seoul is the city where young people gather and live in the greatest numbers. The nationwide local elections, including the Seoul mayoral election, are elections in which representatives of local governments are chosen and issues most closely related to citizens’ daily lives are addressed through policies and pledges. Yet many people did not exercise their right to vote.

People do not go to the polls when they feel little sense of reward in voting. There is no reason to carve out time from their busy lives to vote for candidates who do not speak to their concerns or their future. Ultimately, this means that current Korean politicians are not giving people in their 20s and 30s a real sense that political participation matters, and that they do not accurately understand what kinds of anxiety these citizens want resolved.

The biggest problem felt by Koreans, especially young people, is undoubtedly the problem of widening asset inequality. Even if people work diligently every day, the value of effort is devalued day by day amid the sense of deprivation created by the reality that it is difficult to secure a home of one’s own. Even within large cities, between cities and rural areas, and between generations, a structure is becoming fixed in which the speed of asset growth cannot be matched through labor. The link between income and asset formation is being severed completely.

VALID decided to confront this problem directly. In 2026, I decided to run in the Seoul mayoral election to create a political movement capable of addressing the problem of asset inequality, which is deepening in a rapidly changing world. As a VALID team project, I chose to compete for the

Democratic Party of Korea’s nomination for Seoul mayor, at the age of 36, together with like-minded team members from VALID. The Democratic Party of Korea had become Korea’s new ruling party. As our first task, in November 2025, we launched the “Seoul Is Too Expensive” project, randomly asking Seoul citizens on the street, “Isn’t Seoul too expensive?” Everyone we asked answered that life in Seoul was too expensive. In fact, this was a very natural answer. Yet what made me curious was the starting point of this shared sense that life is “expensive.” No one looks at a luxury bag or a diamond and gets angry simply because it is expensive. But when people look at housing prices or a lunch menu, they cannot help but think, “Why is this so expensive?” Housing and food are absolutely necessary for living, but they cannot be the entirety of life. There are other important things in life, such as dreams, hobbies, family, and friends. Yet as time goes by, citizens are pouring most of their income into housing and food.

Ultimately, another word for “expensive” is “anxious.” When a person’s entire life becomes about housing and food, people become anxious. People can suddenly fall ill, and everyone eventually grows old. Housing and food alone cannot prepare people for tomorrow. When that tomorrow cannot be prepared for, people become endlessly anxious. To say that life is too expensive is, in other words, to say that life is too anxious.

Kim Hyung-nam’s Seoul Mayoral Campaign expanded these concerns and presented slogans, messages, and policies focused on the anxiety citizens feel in their daily lives. Under the banner of “A Seoul People Can Afford to Live In, Bold Change,” we presented “Zero Suicide Rate” as the city’s goal and proposed policies to robustly guarantee housing stability, especially for tenants, as well as a stable life for small business owners, freelancers, and single-person households. I believe this showed a clear difference from other candidates who presented city landmarks and flashy urban development plans. Although I failed in the nomination race, this campaign has been remembered as an unusually impressive campaign that directly addressed the issues of anxiety and inequality that people experience—issues that Korean politics had long ignored or failed to treat seriously.

5. Politics as the Task of Building a “Solid Breakwater” Against Approaching Anxiety

People often joke that if Korea is lucky in one respect, it is that “an attractive extremist politician has not appeared yet.” Perhaps now is Korea’s golden time. Extremism is spreading everywhere, feeding on people’s anxiety.

The only way to confront extremism that offers hatred, exclusion, and violence as solutions to anxiety is to present a model of “democratic politics that confronts anxiety” and produce results. As AI moves beyond the so-called singularity, job anxiety among young people entering society is growing, and

people of all ages and generations are worried about employment insecurity. In this situation, if politics fails to serve as a “solid breakwater” protecting citizens from a changing world, we must take up this task with a sense of crisis that it could otherwise lead to a deeply horrific political outcome.

VALID will continue to diligently build a new worldview to prepare for the coming era, and prepare, together with more colleagues, for a tomorrow in which we can replace the worldview of Korean politics. There is something I often said during the election period:
“There is nothing we cannot do. We simply have not started it yet.”



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Thematic Presentation 2

Elections in Asia : Strengthening Electoral Integrity in Challenging Democratic Contexts



Brizza Rosales

| Executive Director, ANFREL (Asian Network for Free Elections)

Currently serves as Executive Director of the Asian Network for Free Elections and is a regional expert on election observation, electoral integrity, and democratic governance. A democracy and legal practitioner, his/her work focuses on electoral reform and institution-building.

Elections in Asia : Strengthening Electoral Integrity in Challenging Democratic Contexts

Brizza Rosales | Executive Director, ANFREL (Asian Network for Free Elections)

Asia defies easy categorization when it comes to elections. It is a region where some of the world's largest and most complex democratic exercises coexist alongside tightly controlled electoral processes, hybrid regimes, and systems in transition. Elections across Asia do not follow a single trajectory. They reflect deeply embedded political histories, institutional arrangements, and evolving power structures.

Yet, it is precisely this diversity that reveals a shared tension. Across these varied systems, elections continue to be held—often regularly and at scale—but their capacity to function as credible mechanisms of representation is increasingly under strain. The issue is no longer whether elections take place, but whether they remain genuinely competitive, inclusive, and capable of commanding public trust.

From the vantage point of the Asian Network for Free Elections (ANFREL), this moment reflects not a decline of elections, but a transformation in how they operate within political systems. Drawing on recent observation and assessment missions in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Thailand, as well as analytical work on Myanmar and prior engagements in Indonesia's 2024 general elections and the Philippines' evolving electoral landscape toward 2025, a set of recurring patterns emerges across otherwise distinct contexts. These patterns point to structural pressures that extend beyond technical administration, challenges that cannot be addressed through procedural compliance alone.

International frameworks such as the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation remain essential in this regard, emphasizing that elections must be evaluated across the full electoral cycle and against standards of transparency, competitiveness, inclusiveness, and accountability. ANFREL's Model Commitments for Advancing Genuine and Credible Elections builds on these principles by translating them into regionally grounded benchmarks, recognizing that electoral integrity in Asia must be both normatively anchored and contextually responsive.

In Sri Lanka, ANFREL's observation of the 2024 parliamentary elections highlighted a process that was, in many respects, technically well-administered. Election-day procedures were generally orderly, and the institutional capacity of election management bodies remained intact despite a challenging post-crisis environment. However, the broader electoral context revealed underlying asymmetries. Economic instability, the enduring advantages of incumbency, and uneven campaign visibility shaped

the conditions of political competition. As reflected in ANFREL's findings, the credibility of the election could not be assessed solely on its administration; it was equally contingent on the structural environment in which electoral choices were made.

A more constrained variation of this dynamic was observed in Bangladesh during the 2026 elections. ANFREL's observation of over 400 polling stations, combined with social media monitoring conducted in partnership with The Carter Center, indicated that procedural aspects of voting were largely followed in many locations. However, the broader environment, characterized by limited political competition, restricted civic space, and a highly mediated information landscape raised substantive concerns. In this context, procedural compliance coexisted with structural limitations that narrowed electoral choice, underscoring the importance of assessing elections beyond technical benchmarks.

In Nepal, ANFREL's pre-election assessment and subsequent observation revealed a comparatively more open environment, marked by inclusive participation and a functioning electoral administration. Yet, challenges related to campaign finance transparency, uneven access to voter information, and localized political dynamics introduced vulnerabilities that were less visible on Election Day itself. The Nepal experience illustrates that even in relatively competitive settings, electoral integrity must be understood holistically, taking into account the broader ecosystem in which elections unfold. Taken together, these cases demonstrate that the gap between procedure and substance is not binary but exists along a spectrum, shaped by varying degrees of political openness, institutional capacity, and civic space. This spectrum becomes even more evident when viewed alongside developments in larger electoral democracies.

In Indonesia's 2024 general elections—the largest single-day electoral exercise globally—the scale and logistical success of the process underscored the resilience of democratic institutions. At the same time, deeper structural concerns persisted. The blurring of boundaries between state resources and political campaigns, alongside the continued influence of political dynasties and entrenched networks, raised questions about the quality of competition. Here, the challenge was not administrative capacity, but the conditions that shape electoral fairness.

In the Philippines, as the country moves toward the 2028 elections following its 2025 midterm cycle, similar structural concerns remain. While the Philippines has been a regional leader in the use of automated electoral systems, issues related to transparency, auditability, and public trust continue to shape electoral discourse. At the same time, the rapid expansion of digital campaigning and disinformation highlights the growing importance of the information environment in shaping electoral outcomes.

The role of technology across these contexts is therefore complex. In the Philippines, concerns focus on the auditability of automated systems, the transparency of results transmission, and the adequacy of safeguards such as the random manual audit. In Thailand, by contrast, where elections remain largely manual, challenges emerge in different forms—particularly in ballot design, interpretation, and the consistency of tabulation processes. These experiences demonstrate that technology itself is not the determining factor of electoral trust; rather, trust depends on transparency, clarity, and the public’s ability to understand and verify electoral processes.

Equally significant is the transformation of the information environment. Across Bangladesh, Nepal, and Thailand, ANFREL’s work has shown how disinformation, coordinated online behavior, and fragmented information ecosystems are reshaping elections. Electoral processes are no longer confined to institutional procedures; they unfold within broader informational spaces where perception can influence legitimacy as much as process. This shift requires election observation to evolve, integrating digital analysis alongside traditional methodologies.

In more constrained contexts, such as Myanmar, the implications are even more profound. ANFREL’s analytical work demonstrated how electoral processes can be instrumentalized to project legitimacy while systematically excluding meaningful competition.

In response to these complex and evolving challenges, ANFREL’s approach to electoral integrity extends beyond observation. While International Election Observation Missions (IEOMs) remain central, they are embedded within a broader framework encompassing campaigns and advocacy, outreach and communication, governance and electoral reforms, and capacity-building. This integrated model reflects the understanding that electoral integrity cannot be secured through isolated interventions. Rather, it requires sustained engagement across the electoral cycle and across multiple levels of the democratic ecosystem.

Observation missions provide the evidentiary foundation for this work. Through systematic deployment, standardized methodologies, and rigorous analysis, ANFREL is able to generate independent assessments that inform both national and regional discourse. However, these findings are not endpoints. Through advocacy, ANFREL engages stakeholders to translate recommendations into actionable reforms. Outreach and communication efforts ensure that these insights reach broader audiences, contributing to public understanding and accountability. Governance and electoral reform initiatives address structural weaknesses, aligning national practices with international standards while remaining sensitive to local contexts. Finally, capacity-building ensures that domestic actors—particularly civil society and youth—are equipped to sustain electoral integrity over time.

Rebuilding trust in elections must therefore be understood as a long-term process. Trust is not generated by the conduct of a single election, but by the consistency and integrity of electoral processes over time. It depends on transparency in administration, fairness in competition, inclusiveness in participation, and accountability in governance. It also requires the active engagement of civil society, the responsiveness of institutions, and the willingness of political actors to adhere to democratic norms.

From ANFREL’s perspective, the role of regional networks extends beyond observation into the realm of stewardship—linking standards with practice, and national experiences with comparative insight. In a region as diverse as Asia, this means not only documenting electoral processes, but situating them within broader democratic trajectories, including the protection of fundamental freedoms, the pursuit of accountability, and, in some contexts, the long arc of transitional justice.

This is particularly relevant in contexts where electoral processes intersect with conflict, political repression, or contested governance. In such environments, the credibility of elections is inseparable from broader questions of justice, inclusion, and trust in institutions. Where accountability mechanisms are weak or absent, elections risk reinforcing existing inequalities or legitimizing unresolved grievances. Conversely, when grounded in a rights-based approach, elections can serve as entry points for rebuilding public confidence and strengthening democratic norms.

At the same time, the region is operating under increasingly constrained conditions. Civil society organizations, including regional networks, must navigate limited resources, shrinking civic space, and heightened geopolitical tensions that shape both domestic political environments and international engagement. Competing global priorities, shifting donor landscapes, and sensitivities around sovereignty further complicate efforts to support electoral integrity. In this context, adaptability becomes essential. This includes prioritizing strategic interventions, leveraging regional collaboration, and maximizing the use of comparative knowledge to inform targeted, evidence-based engagement.

Adjusting to these realities also requires rethinking how electoral support is delivered. Rather than relying solely on large-scale interventions, there is a growing need for more flexible, context-specific approaches—combining on-the-ground observation with remote monitoring, integrating digital analysis with traditional methodologies, and strengthening partnerships with domestic actors who remain at the forefront of electoral processes. Resource constraints, while limiting, can also drive innovation and sharper prioritization.

Ultimately, the task ahead is not only to observe elections, but to contribute to the conditions that make them meaningful. This requires sustained engagement across the electoral cycle, from pre-election environments to post-election accountability, and a recognition that electoral integrity is deeply interconnected with human rights, governance, and the rule of law. It also demands a collective effort among election management bodies, civil society, policymakers, and regional networks to uphold standards even in challenging political contexts.

Elections across Asia will continue to take place, often at scale and with increasing complexity. The more consequential question is whether they will continue to function as credible mechanisms of representation and accountability in an era marked by both opportunity and constraint. The answer will depend on the willingness of stakeholders to confront structural challenges, pursue meaningful reforms, and reaffirm a shared commitment to democratic principles while navigating the practical realities of limited resources and an increasingly uncertain geopolitical landscape.



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Speech 1

From Youth Protest to Mass Uprising : A Generational Awakening



Saleh Uddin Sifat

| Joint Member Secretary of National Citizen Party

Saleh Uddin Sifat is a political activist and human rights defender. He was a key organizer of youth-led democratic movements which successfully deposed the decade long Authoritarian regime in Bangladesh in 2024. He is currently serving as the Press Secretary of the newly formed Youth-led National Citizen Party (NCP).

From Youth Protest to Mass Uprising : A Generational Awakening

Saleh Uddin Sifat | Joint Member Secretary of National Citizen Party

A Bleeding Letter

| “Mother, I am going to join the protest... If I do not return, do not grieve, be proud.”

What compels a 10th-grade student to write such a final letter before stepping into the streets on 5 August 2024? By then, an entire generation had witnessed enough: Abu Sayeed killed by pellets, Naima Sultana, a schoolgirl, shot on her balcony, and teenagers collapsing from gunshots. These were not distant events; they were lived realities.

The uprising cannot be understood without acknowledging this accumulation of state violence against its citizens. A generation, detached from traditional party structures, emerged as a political force willing to risk everything, not out of impulse, but from experience.

Anti-VAT Movement: Inequality as the First Political Encounter

The awakening of youth began long before 2024. The 2015 Anti-VAT Movement exposed economic inequality. For students already struggling to afford house rent, food, transportation, and education in Dhaka, the VAT on tuition felt like an attack on their rights. The protests, despite multiple attacks by goons of Chatro League (the student wing of the ousted Awami League), forced the government to withdraw the policy, marking an early realization: organized resistance could produce change.

Quota Reform Movement: The Beginning of the End

This consciousness deepened during the 2018 Quota Reform Movement. Under the then-prevailing public service recruitment policy, opportunity itself was structurally constrained: as much as 56 percent of entry-level government posts were set aside under various quotas, with a significant 30 percent exclusively reserved for the children and grandchildren of 1971 freedom fighters. Many students felt excluded from fair competition. The protests were met with violence, arrests, and stigmatization. Students were labeled extremists and anti-national, revealing how dissent was systematically delegitimized.

Road Safety Movement: State Reform Underway

In the same year, the Road Safety Movement exposed failures in governance and the structural violence of the state. Students not only protested but also temporarily managed traffic themselves, demonstrating both the absence of state accountability and the capacity of youth to envision alternatives. Yet again, students were targeted and assaulted by the police and Chatro League as a demonstration of authoritarian control. These movements collectively shaped a generation’s understanding: the problem was not isolated policies, but structural injustice.

Anti-Torture Movement: Breaking Control of the Last Political Space

Universities became key sites of control. Dissenting students were denied dormitories, and political loyalty determined access to basic facilities. “Guestroom Culture” institutionalized torture and intimidation of first-year students.

The killing of Abrar Fahad in 2019 exposed the brutality of this system. His death became a turning point, prompting demands for accountability and inspiring organized resistance. In response to widespread but undocumented torture, we founded Students Against Torture (SAT) to record incidents and support victims. Documentation itself became a form of resistance in a system that denied both abuse and accountability. Yet repression continued. Victims were criminalized, activists were attacked, and institutions remained complicit. This revealed a broader truth: authoritarian control was embedded not only in the state, but also in everyday institutional life.

“Stop Border Killing” Movement: Youth, Sovereignty, and Human Rights

Youth activism also expanded to questions of sovereignty and human rights. The “Stop Border Killing” Movement highlighted the repeated killing of Bangladeshi civilians along the Bangladesh-India border by the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). The image of Felani Khatun’s body hanging on a fence became a symbol of inhumanity and grave human rights violations.

Similarly, protests against Indian influence and support for authoritarian governance connected domestic repression with external politics. Youth began to see authoritarianism not as isolated, but as part of a broader system of power.

Systemic Repression: Disappearances, Killings, and Fear

Over 15 years, patterns of repression intensified:

- Enforced disappearances in secret detention sites infamously known as “Aynaghor” (Following the uprising, a commission of inquiry documented 1,569 verified cases of enforced disappearance across at least 14 detention centers).

- Extrajudicial killings labeled as “crossfire” (The regime of Sheikh Hasina has been accused by rights groups of overseeing more than 2,600 extrajudicial killings—many under the guise of “crossfire” or “gunfights”).
- Knee-capping to permanently disable dissenters in different districts of the country
- Criminalization of human rights defenders such as Adilur Rahman Khan and ASM Nasiruddin Elan

Families of victims, activists, and journalists resisted, transforming grief into collective action. Despite efforts to silence them, these voices persisted. At the same time, a narrative of “development” masked systemic corruption, inequality, and economic exclusion. Infrastructure projects coexisted with financial exploitation and rising youth unemployment.

The Monsoon Revolution: From Protest to Uprising

By 2024, these experiences converged. The reinstatement of the quota system sparked protests under a broader banner: Students Against Discrimination. This shift reflected an expanded political consciousness, from single issues to systemic injustice.

The killing of Abu Sayed on 16 July became a defining moment. His death transformed anger into national resistance. What followed was unprecedented:

- Nationwide protests despite internet blackouts
- Block raids to arrest students
- Use of live ammunition, lethal weapons, and deployment of paramilitary forces, armored vehicles, and helicopters

Citizens from all walks of life joining students in solidarity. The movement evolved into a mass uprising. Despite arrests and repression, coordinators regrouped. On 3 August, a one-point demand was declared, not just the resignation of Sheikh Hasina, but the dismantling of the authoritarian structure itself.

5 August: The Moment Everyone Waited For

On 5 August, many left home knowing they might not return. The streets of Dhaka became a collective force—millions moving with a shared purpose. By noon, the regime collapsed. Sheikh Hasina and Awami League leaders fled the country.

There was no immediate celebration, only disbelief, relief, and silence within noise. Strangers embraced without knowing each other’s names. Personal identity dissolved into something collective.

For many, it was also a moment of return. After years of fear, I could finally go home. Yet the victory carried grief: nearly 2,000 people never returned to their homes, and 30,000 were left disabled for life.

After the Uprising: Justice, Reform, Accountability

The uprising was not an end, but a beginning. Youth emerged as a distinct political force with three core demands:

- Justice for victims of past human rights violations
- Institutional reform – from the constitution to the police, judiciary, electoral system, and more
- Accountability beyond electoral change, including the establishment of free, fair, and credible elections

They rejected the idea that elections alone could resolve systemic problems. Instead, they called for deep structural transformation. In response, youth began forming platforms, initiatives, and political parties focused on democracy and reform.

A Generational Shift

The “Monsoon Revolution” marked more than a political transition, it signaled a generational awakening. This generation is not defined by the past alone. It is forward-looking, politically conscious, and willing to challenge both internal and external forms of domination. In Bangladesh, youth are now at the forefront of democratization, human rights advocacy, and institutional reform. Their struggle reflects a broader shift across the Global South, where youth-led movements are redefining governance and accountability.

Conclusion

The transformation from scattered protests to a mass uprising was not sudden. It was built over years of inequality, repression, and resistance. The fall of the regime opened a new chapter, but its success depends on whether the demands for justice, reform, and accountability are realized. The uprising was a rupture. What comes next will determine whether it becomes a foundation.

(The writer is the Joint Member Secretary of the National Citizen Party of Bangladesh, based in Dhaka. He can be reached at salehsifat@proton.me.)

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Speech 2

The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities in Indonesia



Cho Yong Gi

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Indonesia, Street Paramedic

An activist working at the intersection of grassroots organizing, protest safety, and digital advocacy, with an academic background in philosophy. His/Her work focuses on supporting social movements, documenting civic issues, and building networks for democratic participation in Indonesia.

The Coming Democratic Crisis and Opportunities in Indonesia

Cho Yong Gi | Undergraduate Student of Department of Philosophy of Universitas Indonesia, Street Paramedic

Since Prabowo Subianto took office in 2024, following his electoral victory supported by the promise of the populist the Free Meal Program (MBG), Indonesia has entered a period marked by increasing political tension and institutional strain. While democratic procedures formally remain intact, a series of developments since 2025 suggest a deeper transformation in how power is exercised and contested.

In February 2025, public discontent began to surface through the raising #IndonesiaGelap protests(meaning, Dark Indonesia). Notably, this wave of mobilization did not originate from traditional organizational structures such as student unions or NGOs, but instead emerged organically from the digital sphere. This shift indicates a transformation in how collective actions are less centralized, more spontaneous, and digitally networked. This phenomenon also reflects a growing distrust toward established civil society, traditional intermediaries and formal political channels.

At the same time, these protests were a direct response to the MBG policy. Among students, youth, and broader civil society, there was a growing collective awareness of the long- term consequences of this policy. Constitutionally, 20% of the national budget is allocated to education; however, part of this allocation has been redirected to support the President’s MBG program. This raises concerns regarding the optimization of educational facilities and teacher welfare, and creates anxiety about the long-term impact on future generations who may not receive adequate educational support. In addition, the policy is perceived as creating economic opportunities for certain business actors, raising concerns about potential financial and political motives, including forms of post-electoral patronage or “returning the favor” linked to the supporter of presidential election. These combined concerns ultimately contributed to large-scale mobilization under the Indonesia Gelap protests.

By March 2025, tensions escalated with the revision of the military law. Resistance adopted creative forms such as “Piknik Melawan”(mean, resistance picnic) with colorful and non-violent direct action (NVDA) occupation methods, reflecting attempts to reclaim public space while avoiding direct confrontation. However, a central issue underlying this development is the re-emergence of a dual-function issue similar to the pre-1998 Soeharto era, in which active military personnel are granted expanded roles within civilian governance structures creating stronger shadow governance by the military.

This expansion carries significant implications. It risks narrowing civic space and increasing the role of militarism in civic life, which is one of the key supporting elements of authoritarian systems. Furthermore, accountability becomes more difficult when violations committed by military personnel are processed within military courts, where institutional solidarity(esprit de corps) can protect fellow members regardless of whether the offense falls under military or civilian criminal law. This remains a major source of controversy, particularly as public perception is often confused on the legitimacy of military attributes rather than the actions of individual personnel.

The turning point became more visible during May Day 2025, where a shift in patterns of criminalization began to emerge. Unlike previous protest cycles, where those detained were typically held overnight for questioning and then released, the May Day arrests in several cities indicated a different approach. There were indications of forced criminalization without strong evidentiary basis, including the targeting of protesters as well as paramedics and paralegals who were present to assist demonstrators.

This suggests not only the use of law enforcement to manage public order, but a pattern in which legal instruments are applied in a more coercive and expansive manner. The arrests function not merely as temporary control, but as a mechanism to criminalize participation in protest itself, marking an early indication of a broader pattern that would later escalate into more extensive forms of systemic repression.

By August 2025, accumulated public anger reached a critical point. One of the key triggers was local resistance in regions such as Pati, East Java, against significant increases in land and property taxes (PBB). These increases were closely linked to fiscal consequences of central government policies, particularly budget efficiency measures associated with MBG, which reduced transfers to local governments. As a result, local governments sought alternative revenue sources, effectively shifting the economic burden onto citizens.

This situation led to localized resistance that eventually sparked broader demonstrations across multiple regions. The protests escalated nationally following the tragedy of Affan Kurniawan, an online motorcycle driver whose death intensified public anger. This escalation resulted in one of the largest demonstrations in Indonesia’s history, spreading across more than a hundred cities.

Following this peak, the period from September 2025 onward was marked by intensified repression. There were widespread reports of a “witch-hunting” pattern targeting vocal youth activists, including students and civil society actors. Mass arrests occurred, often accompanied by inconsistent legal outcomes. At the same time, widely circulated evidence indicated involvement of intelligence actors,

field agents, and political actors in escalating or creating unrest during the August protests, including acts such as provocation to loot and arson.

However, enforcement actions disproportionately targeted ordinary and random citizens rather than these higher-level actors. This reflects a pattern of omission, where the state fails to act against certain actors while actively criminalizing others. The consequences are significant, not only does this create a negative precedent of arbitrary repression, particularly against youth, but it also functions to generate fear and a chilling effect. At the same time, fear has its limits, as continued repression may eventually reach a threshold where it no longer produces compliance. The situation reached another critical point in March 2026 with the attempted murder acid attack against Andrie Yunus from KontraS, involving members of the Military Strategic Intelligence Agency (BAIS), as acknowledged by BAIS itself and confirmed by official police statements. This incident is closely connected to his role as a citizen actively engaged in constitutional mechanisms of oversight. He was involved in legal advocacy through the Constitutional Court challenging the military justice system, participated in fact-finding efforts (Komisi Pencari Fakta) regarding the August protests, and was also involved in exposing closed-door legislative discussions on military law at the Fairmont Hotel in March 2025.

In this context, the attack should not be understood solely as violence against an individual, but as an attack on broader principles of accountability and civic participation. The incident fulfills key elements of a serious human rights violation, as it involves active state apparatus and the use of state-linked resources in an attempted act of violence. It reflects the risks faced by individuals who engage in lawful efforts to perform checks and balances through formal legal mechanisms.

Although President Prabowo Subianto publicly condemned the attack as an act of terrorism and called for a thorough investigation, including identifying intellectual actors, no significant progress was observed weeks after the incident. There has been no clear legal resolution, particularly regarding the handling of the case within civilian courts despite its nature as a general criminal offense. This lack of progress creates legal uncertainty and undermines the credibility of the president's public statements.

More importantly, this situation reflects a form of state omission. Despite confirmed involvement and public awareness of the incident, there has been no decisive resolution. This inaction risks enabling the repetition of similar incidents in the future and signals a failure to guarantee protection for citizens. In this sense, the case represents a broader issue of state responsibility, where the absence of action becomes a form of violation in itself.

One critical gap lies in the development of movement infrastructure. This includes not only organizational capacity, but also the infrastructures of knowledge, networks, and collective care. Across different regions in Indonesia, there remains significant potential to strengthen connections among younger generations. Several potential aspects of knowledge, historical memory, and strategic experiences are not fragmented or lost over time. The absence of such infrastructure often forces movements to repeatedly reconstruct analyses, remap power relations, and redesign trial and error strategies.

Equally important is the need to find best practices of collective care within movements. In many urban contexts, including Jakarta, activism tends to focus heavily on moments of mobilization, the protest itself. While abandoning far less attention to the phases before and after the protest. As a result, movements are often unprepared for sustained forms of repression, such as the large-scale "witch hunting" that followed the August protests. The lack of preparation in terms of legal support, safety mechanisms, and psychological care exposes activists to heightened risks. Moving forward, collective care must be understood not as an auxiliary component, but as a core infrastructure of resistance, enabling movements to endure beyond moments of peak mobilization.

At the same time, the digital sphere presents both opportunities and vulnerabilities that cannot be ignored. On one hand, digital platforms have played a significant role in raising political awareness, transforming previously disengaged individuals into active participants in public discourse. Visibility, engagement, and virality have become important entry points for broader mobilization. However, there is an emerging dilemma, the success of a movement cannot be measured solely through digital metrics such as likes, shares, or online visibility. The key challenge lies in bridging digital activism with on-the-ground engagement, ensuring that online participation can effectively support and reinforce actions in the public sphere, where risks are often more immediate and tangible.

This challenge again points back to the question of infrastructure, particularly coordination, communication, and knowledge systems. Without these, the gap between digital and physical spheres risks becoming a structural weakness. Moreover, the digital space itself is increasingly contested. Activists face threats ranging from doxxing, surveillance to hacking and targeted intimidation, often involving apparatus or government proxy actors with access to personal data and technological resources. These conditions underscore the urgent need for stronger digital security training, clearer support systems, and accessible knowledge on risk management mitigation. In this sense, strengthening infrastructure is not only about enhancing effectiveness, but also about ensuring the safety and sustainability of civic engagement in an increasingly hostile environment of current Indonesia situations.

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[Special Session]

Speech 3

The Reality Facing Mexican Youth and the Solidarity Housing Movement : Young People Choosing to Build a Life Together



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The COVID-19 pandemic that swept across the world in 2021 reduced and restricted the physical spaces in which relationships could take place through social distancing, the closure of spaces such as offices, movie theaters, and parks, and restrictions on movement. Yet paradoxically, it accelerated the de-spatialization of labor — the detachment of work from fixed physical workplaces.

Advances in science and technology and the expansion of internet networks moved labor from physical spaces into non-physical and virtual spaces. The shift in labor patterns known as remote work transcended the limits of time and space and accelerated the shift toward a hyper-connected society.

In May 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the end of the Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC). COVID-19 then came to be managed domestically as a respiratory disease, but the movement of digital nomads¹⁾ expanded further across borders. Foreign digital nomads began moving into cities around the world where the cost of living was lower than in their home countries and satisfaction with work-life balance (WLB) was high, such as Chiang Mai in Thailand, Bali in Indonesia, and Lisbon in Portugal. Mexico City is also one of these digital nomad destinations. The influx of Americans was particularly large, given the shared border. In fact, the presence of Americans seeking to live more comfortably in Mexico while earning U.S.-level wages is not a recent phenomenon.

Mexico’s foreign debt crisis in 1982 led the country to apply for an IMF bailout. As the Mexican government accepted the neoliberal policies proposed by the World Bank and the IMF as preconditions for financial support, Mexico’s unequal and dependent relationship with the United States deepened. The privatization of public enterprises, the full opening of capital markets, pro-business institutional reforms for foreign direct investment, labor flexibilization, the expansion of the Maquiladora industry²⁾

1) A digital nomad refers to a person who uses digital devices such as laptops and smartphones to work remotely and live anywhere in the world with internet access, without being tied to a particular space such as an office. This group mainly includes freelancers, startup workers, and remote employees.
2) Maquiladora refers to the bonded processing manufacturing industry. After NAFTA, it operated by taking advantage of geographical proximity to the United States, duty-free import benefits for raw materials and parts, and cheap and abundant labor to assemble and process products such as auto parts, machinery, and electronics for re-export to the United States. It is a major industrial policy supporting the Mexican economy

in border regions, and a strategy of turning Mexico into a global factory all expanded the value of free competition, suggesting that only those who survive global competition can survive at all. These pro-business and pro-U.S. economic policies led to an explosive influx of U.S. financial and investment capital into Mexico, beginning with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) among the United States, Canada, and Mexico on January 1, 1994.

Mexico’s export-oriented manufacturing development strategy, driven by U.S. capital, deepened Mexico’s economic dependency on the United States. It opened the way for American investors, workers, and travelers not merely to visit Mexico, but to occupy it as a space of residence and settlement.

Amid the rapid influx of foreign capital and the flexibilization of labor and human mobility, the continuation of the government’s minimal-intervention policy led almost inevitably to cuts in public budgets for essential public needs such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. The capitalist market logic of free competition became the central value through which development was understood. Within this logic, housing — a basic human right and the space where human life begins and is sustained — was transformed from a common value grounded in land justice and use-value into a capital asset for generating income and an exchange value for profit. It was shifted into the realm of individual responsibility, something those deemed “capable” could freely purchase and dispose of, pushing countless low-income informal workers to the outskirts of the city, to slums, and to informal and illegal self-built housing.

Ironically, the Mexican Constitution of 1917 was one of the first constitutions in the world to enshrine the right to housing, at a time when housing rights were not yet clearly recognized socially or institutionally around the world. Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution declares that all people have the right to live in an adequate environment, including a proper housing environment, for their development and well-being, and that all Mexican citizens have the right to enjoy decent and adequate housing, which the state must guarantee. Yet in reality, this has been a dead right that existed only on paper. The shift toward neoliberal development strategies, together with real estate cartels and the gentrification caused by foreign digital nomads, has unfortunately formed what can only be called an “axis of evil.” It has thoroughly reduced urban housing issues to individual problems and deprived the majority of Mexican citizens of their social right to access adequate housing.

The commodification of the city led by real estate cartels converged with foreigners — digital nomads, “one-month stay” travelers, and long-term travelers — who had relatively greater financial freedom than Mexican residents. This triggered serious urban housing problems: 1) rent increases

and the displacement and eviction of long-standing local residents, and 2) the acceleration of spatial segregation within Mexico City. Of course, the housing issue in Mexico City is not caused solely by the influx of foreigners and the liberalization of the real estate market. Complex factors such as biased urban development and housing policies, administrative neglect, rental practices outside the institutional framework and the absence of regulation, public insecurity, and danger have intersected on multiple levels, reaching an almost irreparable stage. In this situation, foreign investment has flooded from major tourist destinations into residential areas for the construction of lodging facilities, shared offices, and shopping malls. With the introduction of new rental forms such as Airbnb, the living spaces of long-standing residents have been taken away from them. Institutional protections for foreign investment have worked in complex ways to facilitate forced evictions, leading to the unequal redistribution of urban space in Mexico City and the increasingly predatory transformation of gentrification. Ultimately, the housing issue in Mexico City is not simply a matter of whether housing exists or who owns it, but a fundamental demand for the right to the city and the right to housing as human rights, and for the restoration of social rights.

The history of Mexican popular resistance to urban housing issues developed through the Urban Popular Movement (Movimiento Urbano Popular) of the 1970s, organized in radical forms by the urban poor. As it combined with leftist parties and student movements, it grew into a social movement with strong organizational capacity. Demanding recognition of land ownership, guarantees of housing rights, and the provision of public services such as education, healthcare, and transportation, the Urban Popular Movement forced negotiations with the state and called for effective housing policies for informal workers.

In 1985, when a massive earthquake struck Mexico City, destroying urban areas and leaving large numbers of people displaced, the movement exploded as people witnessed a government powerless in disaster recovery and urban regeneration. Amid this national disaster, the housing struggle was reorganized around displaced people, garment workers, and the urban poor, focusing first on relief for disaster victims and housing reconstruction while demanding the universal guarantee of housing rights. The largest movement organization, the United Coordinating Committee of Disaster Victims (Coordinadora Única de Damnificados, CUD), demanded that disaster victims participate directly in government plans for urban reconstruction and called for the guarantee of housing rights and the provision of housing.

In 1986, ahead of the Mexico World Cup, the Miguel de la Madrid government, concerned about public security problems caused by social unrest and declining approval ratings, accepted the demands of the United Coordinating Committee of Disaster Victims (CUD), delivering a victory to the urban housing

struggle. In this process, some movement leaders were co-opted by the government or moved into NGOs and political parties, and radical collective action around the right to the city and the right to housing shifted toward negotiation and project-based politics. As parts of the movement were absorbed into institutions or fragmented, the movement fragmented into internal factional conflict. The remaining radical anti-government housing-rights forces also fractured internally and eventually disintegrated amid the neoliberal tsunami of the 1990s. The real estate market, restructured around the reduction of public housing, the expansion of private construction, and housing financialization, turned housing into a matter of individual credit and income. It became an issue of individual ability and responsibility to be solved by each person, rather than a basic social right for which the state should be held responsible. The Urban Popular Movement as a large-scale organized force disappeared.

Mexico is one of the world's most populous countries, ranking tenth globally with a population of approximately 130 million as of 2025. Of this population, about 100 million people are between the ages of 0 and 45, accounting for approximately 76 percent of the total. Mexico has a demographically young society, with three-quarters of its population aged 45 or younger. Since about 61 million people aged 15 or older participate in economic activity, it is no exaggeration to say that most people enter society as workers after completing compulsory secondary education. Yet unfortunately, 54.8 percent of these 61 million economically active workers work in the informal labor market and do not receive benefits such as social insurance.

In addition to social insurance benefits, the Mexican government's mortgage loans, credit loans, and self-built housing support funds are targeted at workers in the formal labor market who can prove employment through company guarantees or contracts. Of course, there are temporary, paternalistic policies for basic livelihood recipients, disaster victims, and indigenous peoples living in protected areas. However, most informal workers earning about 25 to 40 pesos per hour, approximately 2,000 to 3,200 KRW, cannot meet the conditions set by the government. Access to government housing support policies is effectively restricted or impossible.

Assuming that an informal worker earning 40 pesos per hour works eight hours a day without rest, they can earn 9,600 pesos per month, approximately 768,000 KRW. Considering that the average monthly rent in Mexico City is about 20,000 pesos, approximately 1,600,000 KRW, it is nearly impossible for informal workers to live in the safest and most desirable areas of Mexico City. They are forced to settle on the outermost edges of the city, where public security is unstable, road conditions are poor, public transportation is inconvenient, basic public services such as water, sewage, electricity, and gas are inadequate, and educational, health, and sanitation facilities are lacking.

Without addressing these structural contradictions, political and economic elites and real estate cartels blame young people for their lack of academic ambition, lack of effort, and consumption-oriented habits rather than saving. They claim that young people remain in the informal labor market and fail to own homes because they are irresponsible. Yet this is merely a cynical and vulgar argument from those who know that the benefits of keeping more than half the population in poverty and inequality return to them.

According to the 2020 National Housing Survey (ENVI) conducted by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), young people seek housing through the rental market rather than homeownership due to the difficulty of securing funds for home purchases or accessing mortgage loans. Therefore, gentrification is a core issue directly connected to the housing realities of young people.

Young people driven from the city center to the outskirts by rising rents are now comforting one another in digital spaces and calling for solidarity. Because they are informal workers, they move frequently, and because their range of activity shifts constantly, it is difficult for them to build organizational strength in physical spaces and join the front lines of struggle. Yet they do not treat these limits as grounds for despair. Instead, they are creating new alternatives.

Youth Housing Front (Frente por la Vivienda Joven)

The Youth Housing Front (Frente por la Vivienda Joven, FVJ), established in April 2025, serves both as a refuge and as an organized force of resistance for students, young people entering society, informal workers, and all those excluded in Mexico City. As the 2026 North America World Cup approached, the Mexico City government intensified crackdowns on informal residential areas (colonias populares), claiming the need for public security and beautification in preparation for an international event. Real estate cartels bought up buildings in central districts and converted them into lodging facilities such as hotels, hostels, and Airbnbs favored by foreigners.

As gentrification, the influx of digital nomads, and touristification³⁾ ahead of the World Cup converged, rents skyrocketed. In this process, young people were rapidly pushed into underdeveloped, high-crime

3) Touristification is a compound of “touristify,” meaning to turn an area into a tourist destination, and “gentrification,” which refers to the displacement of original residents due to local development. It describes the process by which residents’ spaces are transformed into tourist zones as the number of tourists increases. Such touristification of residential areas not only threatens residents’ living environments through noise, waste, and invasions of privacy, but also raises rents, drives existing residents out, and replaces them with cafés, souvenir shops, and similar businesses.

outskirts such as Iztapalapa, Tláhuac, and Tacubaya, areas that have remained neglected since the 1985 earthquake. In response, these young people created an organization demanding the realization of housing rights and the resolution of urban gentrification.

On July 4, 2025, the FVJ organized its first anti-gentrification mass rally and declared its total rejection of the urban plan of Mexico City Mayor Clara Brugada. Since the inauguration of a left-wing government in Mexico City, the organized protests of young people, accompanied by confrontational action, created a major public response. On July 16, Mayor Brugada announced that she would address young people’s concerns over soaring housing prices and rent increases. She said she would submit to the Mexico City Congress a 14-clause bill on fair, reasonable, and affordable rent-setting and actively engage in dialogue with young people. However, this was merely a stopgap measure to get through the situation, without any real intention of addressing the core problem.

At 6:30 a.m. on August 27, 2025, officers from the Secretariat of Citizen Security (SSC) suddenly stormed a mixed-use residential and commercial building located at 11 República de Cuba Street near the Palacio de Bellas Artes in Mexico City’s historic center. Under the guise of enforcing a forced eviction order, they committed an inhumane act by expelling 10 families from 19 residential units and two commercial shops onto the street, throwing furniture, home appliances, household goods, and daily necessities out of the building. Upon hearing the news that day, members of the Youth Housing Front (FVJ) gathered faster than anyone else.

Large-scale public protests and pressure on the government were important, but above all, they rushed there in solidarity so that no one would have to fight alone, and launched the “Cuba 11 Campaign.” For those occupying the street with the determination not to move even one step from the place where they had been expelled, the FVJ requested relief supplies, including daily necessities, medicine, food, and drinks, through social media platforms such as X, Instagram, and Facebook. It also recruited volunteers to provide protection in preparation for threatening situations. The FVJ called for solidarity from lawyers for the legal struggle and from medical personnel for health and sanitation. It prepared press conferences, produced videos to share the course of the struggle with more people, and organized broader solidarity.

The Youth Housing Front (FVJ) knows that it is difficult to continuously hold radical and powerful mass rallies against the government in the way organized labor can. For this reason, it places importance on “everyday struggle.” FVJ members rush to small-scale forced eviction sites across Mexico City, stand with residents and share in their daily lives. On behalf of those who have been forcibly evicted, they post updates on social media, share information, and recruit volunteers. They paint murals on building

walls, put up flyers, and leave comments on politicians’ social media accounts, urging them to act to guarantee housing rights.

Young people are spreading the awareness that “housing is a right, not a commodity.” They shout “No” to a world that says everyone must survive on their own, and rather than being fixated on the scale of participation, they are building “houses of solidarity” by connecting in everyday life, sharing their lives, and standing together. In this way, the housing-rights struggle of young people is gathering powerful force.

The youth of Mexico are now accepting the housing inequality and urban spatial segregation created by 40 years of neoliberalism as a political problem that can be solved. They are gathering a strong will to take the initiative in solving it as our problem and as a social problem, not as an individual problem. They assert that housing is not a capital value dictated by market and political logic, but an absolute and universal value that every human being must enjoy.



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Speech 4

Between Resistance and Survival : The Struggles and Aspirations of Myanmar Youth Post-Coup

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Between Resistance and Survival
: The Struggles and Aspirations of
Myanmar Youth Post-Coup

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1. Introduction

Students and young people have historically been a driving force of social change, acting as key political actors at the center of labor, anti-war, independence, and democratization movements (TeixeriaCamila, 2024). This characteristic is also clearly evident in Myanmar. Myanmar’s youth have consistently engaged in political participation, from the pre-1948 independence movement to subsequent democratization movements. General Aung San, still revered as Myanmar’s independence hero, was also a member of the youth generation. However, since Ne Win’s military coup in 1962, the military regime has ruled the country under “Burmese-style Socialism” and has severely suppressed students and young people (Wire and Hein Htet Kyaw 2026). In particular, the student protest at Yangon University on July 7, 1962, which resulted in hundreds of casualties and the bombing of the Student Union building, became the starting point for repeated suppression of young people. Since then, young people have stood at the forefront of revolutionary movements, from the 1988 “8888 Uprising” and the 2007 Saffron Revolution to the “Spring Revolution” following the 2021 coup, and the military has treated these young people as a primary target of control and repression.

Even in this oppressive environment, Myanmar youth took to the streets in resistance immediately after the February 1, 2021 coup. While the older generation, unable to shake off memories of the harsh military regime, tried to dissuade them out of fear, young people voluntarily joined the protests because they could not accept the reality that the results of the 2020 general election had been denied. However, the initially peaceful protests were quickly driven into violence by the military and police’s armed crackdown, causing grave harm, including the killing and arrest of many young people. This situation shows that resistance is not merely a political act, but a reality that entails life-threatening risks.

This article examines how Myanmar youth are living after the coup and how they perceive resistance amid the prolonged resistance against the military. To this end, I conducted interviews with eight young people of my generation who directly experienced the coup: Win-tut, Win-thet, Win-min, Win-paing, and Win-wa, who are studying abroad; Rin-luck and Rin-tet, who live in Myanmar; and Rin-ttu¹⁾, who recently left Myanmar to study abroad. At the time of the 2020 general election, they were all university students and participated in the election as voters. Most of them said they had voted in order to clearly express their opposition to the military.

However, their daily lives changed drastically after the 2021 coup. They came to grasp the situation amid confusion caused by internet shutdowns and information control, and rumors delayed some of their initial responses. Afterward, most participated in protests, but their activities were restricted under the risks of arrest, checkpoints, and surveillance, and some shifted to online activities. As livelihood issues became more important over time, they began to continue their lives in various ways, such as giving up on returning to their studies, seeking employment, or studying abroad.

Based on these interviews, this article summarizes the practical difficulties Myanmar youth face and their changed perceptions as the post-coup crisis has become protracted. In particular, it focuses on what choices they make between resistance and survival, and what meaning these experiences hold for their future lives and society.

2. Lives Under Threat

During the approximately five years since the Spring Revolution began, Myanmar’s socio-economic situation has changed significantly. Since 2021, the food crisis has intensified due to rising prices and global price shocks (Lesego 2026), and as of 2024, high inflation of around 20-30 percent, currency devaluation, and ongoing conflict have combined to drive up overall living costs sharply (Phyu Latt Hsu 2026). Before the coup, a family could maintain its livelihood with a monthly income of about 300,000 kyat, but now even families earning more than 1 million kyat face serious difficulties. This economic deterioration has directly affected young people’s lives, leading more of them to choose realistic survival strategies, such as interrupting their studies and seeking work. Indeed, young people like Rin-luck, Rin-tet, and Rin-ttu are working while their university education remains suspended, living by strictly reducing consumption in order to maintain their livelihoods within limited income.

The economic pressure on young people caused by the worsening post-coup economy is considerable. According to Rin-tet, who lives in Myanmar, young people working in garment factories receive monthly wages of about 300,000-400,000 kyat, almost the same as before the coup, while also having to send living expenses to their families. However, as real purchasing power has declined sharply due to rising prices, even basic consumption that was possible in the past has become difficult. They are barely securing the minimum amount of food needed to survive, and despite performing the same labor as before the coup, their quality of life has dropped significantly. This situation goes beyond a simple economic problem and acts as a factor that seriously threatens young people’s overall lives.

1) All names used in this article are pseudonyms. To help readers follow the discussion, the names of young people residing abroad begin with “Win,” while the names of those residing in Myanmar begin with “Rin.” “Rin-ttu” is an exception to this pattern, but “Rin” was used because he had lived in Myanmar until recently

The hardships facing Myanmar's youth after the coup are not limited to threats to livelihood caused by the economic crisis. On February 10, 2024, the Myanmar military regime revived the People's Military Service Law, which imposes military service on men aged 18 to 35 and women aged 18 to 27. This law, enacted in 2010 but having remained largely dormant since then, is a law on compulsory military service that primarily targets the younger generation and can impose at least two years and up to five years of military service. In a situation where armed struggle against the military continues, newly conscripted soldiers were highly likely to be used by the military as human shields. Moreover, for young people who have resisted the military more than anyone since the coup, the very prospect of serving the military was horrifying. For this reason, when the law was implemented, the number of young people trying to leave Myanmar out of fear of forced conscription increased sharply (Maria 2026). The number of Myanmar youth entering neighboring countries such as Thailand in search of work surged, regardless of their legal status, and many young people also went abroad to continue the education that had been interrupted in Myanmar.

Various forms of harm following the implementation of the conscription system have also continued to emerge. In a situation where there are not enough young people voluntarily responding to conscription, testimonies indicate that in some areas, mobilization is being carried out through random lotteries, forcible taking, or even kidnapping. According to Rin-luck, cases of young people being kidnapped are occurring in some parts of Yangon, and there have been cases in which people paid monthly extortion money to avoid military service or were released after money was demanded following a kidnapping. These amounts range from about 1 million kyat to 10 million kyat, and some people are placed in a situation where they must continue paying a fixed amount every month.

In Rin-ttu's case as well, the conscription system appears in a form combined with financial extortion. He stated that one of his family members had been selected for conscription through a random lottery and was told that they would have to pay money to avoid it. It is not uncommon for those in charge of conscription at the village level, or military officials, to extract money by using exemption from military service as leverage, and sometimes they use lists for extortion regardless of whether the person is actually subject to conscription. There are also reports of people not returning after being taken by force, and in many cases, even whether they are alive or dead cannot be confirmed. In particular, this harm tends to be concentrated among economically vulnerable lower-income groups.

Furthermore, the conscription system is expanding into a more serious social problem by becoming entangled with kidnapping and human trafficking. According to the statements of Rin-ttu and Rin-tet, kidnapped young people are exposed to the risk of being handed over not only to the military but also to online fraud organizations or sex-trafficking networks, and disappearance cases occur frequently in

the Yangon area. Rin-tet also said that although he had not suffered direct harm himself, he constantly witnesses cases around him involving kidnapping, demands for money, and flight abroad in connection with the conscription system. In this way, Myanmar youth are now in a situation where their physical safety, not only their economic survival, is now under threat.

3. The Limits and Tasks of the Spring Revolution as Seen by Young People

As about five years have passed since the Spring Revolution, the momentum of resistance has weakened to some extent, but the resistance itself continues. However, the National Unity Government (NUG), which had served as a central actor, has not been recognized as an official government either domestically or internationally, and citizens face a reality in which they have little choice but to follow the laws and systems of the military regime for their own safety. In particular, the general election held in three phases from December 2025 to January 2026 is widely regarded as a limited election designed to prolong military rule. Through this process, Min Aung Hlaing was elected president in April 2026, further strengthening the military's power base. In this situation, the military regime has formally adopted the appearance of a civilian government while substantially maintaining the existing power structure, and changes are accordingly appearing in the resistance and ways of life of young people.

The views of the eight young people I interviewed regarding the ongoing resistance since the coup differed slightly. Although fatigue had accumulated over time, they all said that they had not completely given up hope that Myanmar would one day reclaim democracy. However, they also said that there were realistic constraints on actively participating in resistance, and some had currently suspended their activities.

Taken together, the accounts of the young people who participated in the interviews show that the current resistance in Myanmar faces structural limits that make it difficult to sustain. Win-tut expressed skepticism about the sustainability of the resistance, referring to the situation in which young people are seeking overseas migration after the implementation of the conscription system and waiting for visas. In particular, political legitimacy is necessary for national governance, but the young people perceived that neither the military nor the NUG had sufficiently secured it. In this situation, they saw young people as having little choice but to prioritize individual safety and survival. In this context, young people stand at a crossroads: either follow the rules under the military's control, or, if they are to escape from it, leave Myanmar and live as workers, students, humanitarian residents, or refugees. From the perspective of resistance against the military, this suggests that as more young people leave Myanmar, the momentum of resistance may decline. Win-min also said that while he did not want to recognize military rule in the prolonged coup situation, he could not rule out the possibility that he

might eventually have no choice but to live under that system. This statement shows the gap between the resistance Myanmar's youth face and the reality before them.

Meanwhile, the statements of Win-paing and Win-thet show in greater detail the structural and psychological constraints faced by young people in this situation. Win-paing pointed out that international engagement and support remain centered on the military, and that educated young people are refusing to be incorporated into the military system and are leaving the country, which could hinder long-term national development and the possibility of democratization. He also presented a pessimistic outlook that, as long as the military maintains the existing power structure, the transition to democracy will remain structurally restricted, especially if the 2008 Constitution is not changed. Win-thet, drawing on his experience of arrest, also mentioned the realistic burden of having to risk personal sacrifice in order to participate in resistance, saying that only limited participation within the bounds of guaranteed survival is possible. Furthermore, he said that although it is true that the NUG is difficult to see as a fully reliable center of resistance despite antipathy toward the military, it is not desirable to place the entire responsibility for the resistance movement on the NUG. In this way, young people are seeking a balance between idealistic resistance and realistic survival, and they appear to be gradually adjusting their life strategies toward adaptation to the system.

Win-paing's interview shows that the sustainability of resistance is gradually weakening in the prolonged crisis, and that a pattern is spreading in which individuals make compromises with reality in order to survive. He said that the fact that he is still alive after experiencing the interruption of education caused by COVID-19, the coup, and the subsequent protests feels like a "miracle," emphasizing the severity of the life he has experienced over the years before and after the coup. At the same time, he sees the military's continued hold on power and Min Aung Hlaing's reorganization of power as an already anticipated course of events, and he presents a critical view that the NUG, as an anti-junta actor, has also seen its legitimacy weaken compared with the early period. In particular, he referred to the reality that young people seeking overseas migration after the implementation of the conscription system have no choice but to follow the administrative procedures required by the military, making it clear that this does not mean consent to the system, but rather an unavoidable choice for survival. On the other hand, the case of paying monthly extortion money to avoid military conscription shows that individuals are adopting complex survival strategies between resistance and compliance. Through these cases, Win-paing pointed to the limits of armed struggle and emphasized that non-violent methods, such as the spread of education and knowledge, could be realistic response strategies. Win-paing's story shows that resistance in Myanmar society is no longer simply a matter of participation, but has become a choice directly tied to survival, and that many citizens are placed under structural constraints that leave them no choice but to live while adapting to reality.

The interviews with Win-wa, Rin-luck, and Rin-tet show that resistance in Myanmar is gradually weakening in terms of sustainability amid the prolonged conflict, and that individuals are forced to make complex choices between idealistic resistance and realistic survival. Win-wa originally had a negative view of armed struggle and war itself, and said that the conflict should have been resolved through dialogue from the beginning. However, as time passed, the situation entered a phase that has become difficult to reverse, and he expressed the view that the possibility of alternative solutions is also being restricted amid the ongoing reality of armed conflict. In Rin-luck's case, he pointed out that people rely more on youth groups actually engaged in armed struggle than on the NUG, an institutional political actor, and expressed concern over the gradual weakening of the NUG's legitimacy and influence amid the prolonged resistance. Nevertheless, his opposition to the military regime remains firm. Like him, many Myanmar people outwardly follow the laws and systems required by the military regime, while maintaining a dual attitude that does not regard this as consent to the system.

Meanwhile, Rin-tet's statement shows that perceptions of resistance are not simply a matter of whether one participates, but are intricately intertwined with questions of moral responsibility and survival. He confessed that, in a situation where he realistically cannot directly participate in resistance, diagnosing the situation as having "no hope" feels like committing a sin against the victims of the revolution, while at the same time he still feels that he stands with them. He also emphasized that not only he himself, but many Myanmar citizens, are in a situation where they have no choice but to focus on economic activity in order to maintain their livelihoods, and that this should be understood as a strategic choice for survival rather than a weakening of resistance. Indeed, in the early period after the coup, Myanmar citizens engaged in forms of passive resistance such as refusing to pay taxes or participate in state events. However, as continuous suppression and control made it increasingly difficult to maintain such resistance, they have moved toward complying with some requirements of the system. Such behavior can be interpreted not as acceptance of the system, but as an unavoidable process of adaptation in order to continue life under restricted conditions. As a result, Myanmar youth can be seen as forming a complex way of life in which they maintain an internal sense of resistance while conforming to the system to some extent in order to secure individual safety and livelihood under structural conditions that make it difficult to continue resistance head-on.

Lastly, Rin-ttu's statement shows the complex reality within the resistance. He pointed out that while there are young people actually participating in and fighting for the resistance, there are also some groups that use resistance for their own gain. He also sees that the NUG has various limitations, and that those participating in resistance on the ground are placed in an even more difficult situation. Nevertheless, he evaluates that the group that has borne the greatest sacrifice so far is the youth, and that if the resistance succeeds, its achievements will also belong to the youth.

4. Conclusion

As this article has shown, Myanmar youth are currently placed in a highly complex situation between resistance and survival. While conducting the interviews, I also came to feel that the reality I thought I already knew as a Myanmar youth was in fact made up of much deeper and more specific difficulties. In particular, as someone who came abroad after participating in protests following the coup, I cannot deny that I feel a certain sense of responsibility for this resistance and, at the same time, that I am gradually becoming exhausted by a situation that has lasted for five years. This can be understood not merely as a personal emotion, but as a common reality currently experienced by Myanmar youth.

At present in Myanmar, despite the ongoing resistance, the military regime maintains its de facto governing structure, and citizens are placed in a situation where they have no choice but to adjust their lives to the system to some extent in order to survive. Even when residing abroad, contact with the military regime is unavoidable for administrative procedures such as visa issuance or passport renewal, creating a contradictory situation in which they must comply with it in practice while rejecting the system internally. Such problems are burdensome even for those living abroad, but the difficulties faced by young people inside the country are incomparably greater, as they are exposed to far more direct risks such as arrest, torture, and war. Therefore, the very act of not forgetting this reality and continuing to recognize it carries important meaning.

This article also shows that resistance is not necessarily limited to street protests or direct action. Fundraising activities carried out abroad, refusing to accept the military regime, and continuing resistance within the possible range of everyday life are also forms of resistance. This means that resistance continues not only through visible action, but also within individuals' attitudes and perceptions. At the same time, the military is suppressing such resistance with force, and in the process, citizens are experiencing great loss and resentment. Ultimately, people are inevitably adapting to the system in order to survive, but inwardly, they continue to resist.

What matters for the future in this situation is not simply whether resistance can continue, but how to live within this reality and in what direction to move forward. At present, rather than changing the military regime in the short term, the more realistic issue appears to be how to protect people's survival within it. At the same time, it is very important to sustain an awareness of democracy and human rights through education for the next generation, and to record and pass on the military's abuses without forgetting them. Ultimately, the problem facing Myanmar youth goes beyond simple political conflict. It is a question of how to create survival, memory, and the future, and sustained reflection on these questions is necessary.

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NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

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[Special Session]

Speech 5

The Direction of the Thai Civil Society Amidst Global Movements



Sirapob Phumphungphut

| Former political prisoner, Activist of Ratsadon 2020 Movement

Sirapob Phumphungphut is a former Thai student activist leader. He previously faced a two-year prison sentence as a political prisoner under the Lese-majeste law (Article 11). Currently, he works on prisoners' rights, correctional justice, and the pro-democracy movement.

The Direction of the Thai Civil Society Amidst Global Movements

Sirapob Phumphungphut | Former political prisoner, Activist of Ratsadon 2020 Movement

The United States represents a variable that impacts global social, economic, and political systems. Examples include its withdrawal from international cooperative organization¹⁾, the implementation of economic policies, and the infringement of sovereignty in various parts of the world. Although this may seem distant from Thailand, the impact is incredibly close. All the aforementioned factors, particularly Western influences, invariably affect the civil society in Thailand. Furthermore, the author has not yet addressed the highly altered Thai political situation following the end of the street protests by the 2020 Ratsadon movement, as well as the election results that drastically changed the Thai political landscape in 2026. This leads to the question, “In what direction should the social movements in Thailand proceed?” which the author will elaborate on further.

This document aims to comprehensively cover the situations faced by the Thai state and the civil society. The study’s framework spans the period from after the 2023 election to after the 2026 election. For ease of understanding, the author has divided the content into three sections: 1. The influence of global superpowers on Thailand, 2. The Thai political situation after the 2023 and 2026 elections, and 3. The civil sector in Thailand. Finally, the author will synthesize these points to propose directions and create opportunities amidst the current ongoing circumstances.

The Influence of Global Superpowers on Thailand

The United States plays a significant economic and security role with the Thai government. However, one cannot avoid mentioning the 36 percent import tariff imposed by the US on Thailand. This occurred because President Donald Trump perceived that the US had a trade deficit with Thailand. In 2025, Thailand exported goods to the US amounting to 72,506.39 million USD, but imported only 21,144.98 million USD from the US²⁾. This very reason led to the negotiations between Thailand and Cambodia regarding their border dispute, where the US used tariffs to pressure an end to the conflict. Trump stated that a refusal to comply would result in the termination of trade negotiations with Thailand. Besides the issues, there are also secret budget purchases of military equipment from the US and continuous interactions between the armed forces. Furthermore, Thailand also grants tax exemptions to the United States.

1) The White House, “Withdrawing the United States from International Organizations, Conventions, and Treaties that are Contrary to the Interests of the United States”, January 2026.
2) Ministry of Commerce (Thailand), “Trade Report”, 20 April 2026.

Severe budget cuts to US human rights organizations have profoundly impacted civil society groups working in humanitarian aid. Instances include organizations assisting HIV patients, groups helping war refugees fleeing from Myanmar to the Thai border, or anti-corruption advocacy organizations. This has made their operational efforts exceedingly difficult. Moreover, domestic fundraising is highly challenging due to both societal attitudes and economic problems. This serves as an even greater obstacle for civil society, which relies on funding to drive its campaigns.

The Thai Political Situation from After the 2023 Election to After the 2026 Election

The situation regarding rights and freedoms in the country remains highly restricted, with widespread legal actions taken against political dissidents. Currently, Thailand has 62 political prisoners, 150 cases that have been adjudicated (and continuously increasing), and 1,997 individuals facing legal proceedings.³⁾ These statistics persist amidst an unpredictable political climate. This stems from the country’s structural problems, seamlessly established alongside the Thai-style democratic regime enshrined in the 2017 Constitution—a “dictatorship in the guise of democracy”.

The mechanisms of the constitution are designed to obstruct democracy from consolidating. Examples include the victory of the Move Forward Party, which failed to form a government due to a lack of endorsement from the Senate. Other examples include the dissolution of the Move Forward Party due to its policy to amend Lese Majesty article 112, the dismissal of PM Srettha Thavisin and PM Paetongtarn Shinawatra within a mere two-year span, or even the Constitutional Court’s ruling that denied citizens direct participation in establishing a Constitution Drafting Assembly. These situations are the continuous aftermath of the 2014 coup, representing over a decade of democratic regression in Thailand. It is a condition where the judiciary intervenes in the executive branch’s policy implementations, strips the legislative branch of its right to propose laws, and completely restricts the rights and freedoms of the people in the name of “judicialization”.

All of this has not yet included the monarchy, which was addressed during the 2020 protests. Pro-democracy activists demanded structural reforms to the monarchy and an end to its intervention in the country’s politics and economy. However, the result of these demands provided an excuse grounded in national security to restrict people’s freedoms instead, utilizing legal instruments like Lese Majesty article 112 and limiting the power of political parties as the legislative branch.

3) Thai Lawyers for Human Rights, “March 2026: Section 112 verdicts acquit ‘Piyarat-Nawat’; ‘Promsorn’ detained pending Supreme Court appeal: Kanruthai sentenced to total of 15 years in two cases”, 3 April 2026.

Following the 2026 election, which marked the first victory in three decades for the conservative faction in the Thai political arena, the Bhumjaithai Party⁴⁾—a consolidation of local politicians—emerged successful. Although civil society also achieved a victory through a referendum campaign pushing for a new constitution under a restricted framework, PM Anutin Charnvirakul’s government has demonstrated no intention to advance this issue further in parliament following its policy statement⁵⁾.

“Blue Network”⁶⁾ is the current term defining Thai politics, where the majority in the House of Representatives belongs to the Bhumjaithai Party, the Senate majority is self-selected by the Bhumjaithai network, independent organizations are chosen by the Senate, and civil servants are appointed through influential networks. Given this densely knit and insular “Blue” network, it is highly difficult for the civil sector to penetrate the spaces of state power. This serves as a brief summary of contemporary Thai politics, leading to the crucial question of how the civil sector should proceed.

The Civil Sector in Thailand

Although the civil sector has consistently campaigned to amend or propose various laws—such as the Political Amnesty Act, amendments to the Public Assembly Act, or section-by-section constitutional amendments—they have been continually rejected. This was the case until the civil sector’s campaign following the parliament’s resolution to hold a public referendum asking, “Do you want a new constitution to be drafted?”. The proposal received 21,622,029 affirmative votes, accounting for 58.64 percent, marking a significant victory on the political front.

In terms of rights, the domestic civil sector has worked continuously. This ranges from advocating for gender equality, which resulted in the Marriage Equality Act granting LGBTQIAN+ individuals the right to marry, to environmental issues where citizens in multiple areas faced the construction of community-impacting waste incinerators. Through the power of local citizens, many of these projects were halted, leading to proposals to amend Thailand’s factory establishment laws to ensure they prioritize public well-being.

However, the civil sector currently faces numerous Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP) initiated by politicians, corporate entities, and civil servants. For instance, the Director-General of the Department of Provincial Administration sued citizens who participated in investigating election

4) Thai PBS World, “Bhumjaithai sweeps election with 194 seats in landslide victory”, 8 February 2026.
5) The Secretariat of the Cabinet (Thailand), “Policy Statement of the Council of Ministers”, 9 April 2026.
6) The color “blue” refers to the primary color used by the Bhumjaithai Party. It is also applied to Senators who originate from the Bhumjaithai Party’s network, commonly known as the “Blue Senators.” Furthermore, another underlying connotation of the color blue is the monarchy; therefore, the use of blue is often equated with demonstrating reverence for the King.

fraud involving barcodes. Mr. Suchart Chomklin, the Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, filed multiple defamation lawsuits against citizens who criticized his ministerial performance. Lawsuits weaponizing legal provisions to block public participation, particularly defamation charges and Lese Majesty article 112 of the Criminal Code, have severely restricted the freedoms of civil society.

Recommendations

The author proposes a broad conceptual framework to foster processes for civil sector participation, aiming to expand operational networks and empower civil society amidst conservative global and regional political currents. In the author’s view, democracy can only take root through the active participation of the civil sector. While this may seem fundamental to readers, establishing these basics remains exceedingly difficult due to the specific context of the region. The recommendations are as follows:

- 1) Build Alliances and Participate: The civil sector must insert itself into political spaces from the local to the national level. This should be done not as politicians, but as advocates pushing for problem resolution and demands. This effort must coincide with disseminating knowledge and understanding to local communities, alongside building rapport with local civil servants. Because civil servants and politicians are the primary adversaries of the civil sector, participating in expanding these alliances is crucial. Examples include utilizing formal complaint mechanisms to engage with local councils, independent organizations, or parliamentary committees (to report problems and offer recommendations).
- 2) Foster International Cooperation: Although Thailand has several organizations connected to global bodies, it is nearly impossible for informal civil sector organizations to access funding or opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary to create interconnected “spaces” at the national level. This will serve as a foundational platform for communicating localized issues to other regions.
- 3) A Shared Vision: The civil sector is currently fragmented, lacking solidarity or consensus on aligned demands across issues like human rights, the constitution, and the environment. Even when organizations work on the same issues, civil society must consolidate its strength to build bargaining power against the state through unified demands. A critical mass of collective power can lead to substantial change.

Conclusion

Democracy can only take root when the driving social force is sufficiently powerful. It is undeniable that the global situation is uncondusive to the growth of civil society, marked by the decline of operational mechanisms among state-to-state international organizations and a continuously growing conservative trend fueled by superpowers like the United States. Adopting a defensive stance in such circumstances is absolutely vital to sustain the struggle. Currently, the author observes that many organizations have been forced to cease operations due to intense global political currents, leaving rights violations unscrutinized. This is a shared problem; it is not merely an issue for the civil sector of any single nation to advocate for independently, but a collective issue that must be pushed forward at the global level. The consolidation of civil society to effect change is therefore highly imperative, and it must expand its role amidst this crisis of democratic regression.



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Transitional Justice Session

After State Violence and Social Tragedy : The Enduring Trauma

[Moderator]

Lae-goon PARK | Head of Operation, 4.16 FoundionStudies

[Introductory Presentatio]

What Remains in the Wake of State Violence and Social Disasters: Trauma

In-young CHO | Attorney, GongGam Human Rights Law FoundationStudies

[Speech 1]

Sewol-ho Disaster Trauma and State Responsibility

: The Question Twelve Years On—What Must the State Do?

Sun-woo KIM | Secretary General, April 16 Coalition on the Sewol Ferry Disaster

[Speech 2]

Trauma Experienced by Victims of the October 29 Itaewon Disaster, and What They Demand of the State

Mi-hyeon LEE | People's Committee for the Itaewon Disaster of 29 October, Co-executive ManagerStudies

[Speech 3]

Where Was the State? Neglect and Failed Recovery 16 Months After the December 29 Jeju Air Crash at Muan Airport

Yu-jin KIM | Representative, Bereaved Families Association of Victims of the Jeju Air Crash

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Introductory Presentation

What Remains in the Wake of State Violence and Social Disasters : Trauma



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What Remains in the Wake of State Violence and Social Disasters : Trauma

In-young CHO | Attorney, GongGam Human Rights Law Foundation

I. Introduction: Two Stories Placed Side by Side

This session places state violence and social disasters side by side. State violence refers to active violence directly committed by the state against citizens, while social disasters result from the failure of safety systems that should have functioned. The forms of harm are different. Yet what remains for the victims is the same: anger and fear toward the state, the pain of not knowing the truth, and the reality of having to fight alone while no one takes responsibility.

Amid social discrimination and stigma, secondary victimization, and hatred, trauma does not end. It is reproduced. The structure is the same. The state failed to protect the lives and safety of its citizens, and as a result, victims were forced to fight outside the protection of law and institutions. Whether through active violence or state omission, both point to the same question of state responsibility. The question, then, converges into one: What must the state do about the trauma that remains afterward?

II. The Specific Nature of Trauma and the Structures Through Which It Is Reproduced

1. The Distinctive Characteristics of Trauma from State Violence and Social Disasters

Social disasters leave victims with complex trauma because they occur through institutional failure even though they could have been prevented. Victims come to understand their suffering not as misfortune, but as the result of abandonment, and in the process they lose trust in the state and its institutions themselves.

The question “Why were they not rescued?” is not a simple question. It is a moral injury caused by a reality in which justice does not function. Such injury cannot be resolved through psychological therapy alone. It must be accompanied by truth-seeking and accountability.

Trauma does not end at the moment of the event. It is reactivated in the present by delays in truth-seeking, avoidance of responsibility, distortion of history, and the recurrence of similar disasters. When stigma such as “they are seeking compensation” and secondary victimization are added, trauma is continuously reproduced not only by the event itself, but by the way society treats victims after the event.

2. The Structure Through Which Trauma Repeats in Korean Society

Repeated frustration of truth-seeking, the politicization and stigmatization of victims, secondary victimization by the media, and social pressure to “move on” or “forget” combine to make trauma chronic.

The trauma of social disasters is not merely an individual psychological response. It is a structural condition that continues to operate in the present, produced by delayed truth-seeking, the absence of punishment for those responsible, and restrictions on victims’ participation. Therefore, it cannot be resolved through treatment or counseling alone. It depends on whether transitional justice is implemented.

III. Principles of Transitional Justice and the Current Situation in Korea

1. State Obligations Required by the Van Boven Principles (A/RES/60/147) and the Current Situation in Korea

Principle	Requirement	Current Situation in Korea
Principle 1: General Obligation of the State	The duty to prevent impunity, including investigation, prosecution, punishment, reparation, and prevention of recurrence.	Courts recognize the state’s liability for compensation, but criminal punishment of those responsible remains extremely limited. A systematic pattern of impunity continues to repeat.
Principle 2: Right to the Truth	The inalienable right to know the circumstances and reasons for past events.	Sewol Ferry disaster: unresolved even after the conclusion of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters. Itaewon disaster: truth-seeking delayed. Official historical documentation remains insufficient.
Principle 3: Duty to Preserve Memory	The state’s obligation to take measures to preserve collective memory.	Sewol Ferry disaster: controversy over the creation of memorial spaces. Itaewon disaster: insufficient spaces for memorialization and mourning.
Principle 4: Victims’ Right to Know	The right of victims and families to know the identity of perpetrators and the circumstances of violations.	Itaewon disaster: information blocking operated systematically as part of the government’s response.
Principle 24: Restrictions on Amnesty	Prohibition of amnesty for serious international crimes.	In the history of state violence, there have been precedents of pardoning military forces. In current social disasters, punishment itself remains insufficient.

2. The Principles to Combat Impunity and the Current Situation in Korea

The Joinet–Orentlicher Principles (2005) define impunity not simply as a situation in which perpetrators are not punished, but as the entirety of state inaction: failure to investigate, failure to punish, failure to disclose the truth, and delay in victims’ recovery.

In the case of the Sewol Ferry disaster, the cycle of establishing a truth commission, obstructing it, terminating it, and re-establishing it was repeated three times. In the Itaewon disaster, procedures alone have been repeated—National Assembly investigation, special police investigation, joint audit, and Special Investigation Commission—while truth and responsibility remain undetermined. Seen through this standard, Korea’s response to social disasters repeatedly produces a condition of structural impunity.

IV. Structural Reasons Why Victims of Social Disasters Are Placed “Outside the Law”

The core reason why victims of social disasters in Korea are placed outside the protection of law and institutions is not a lack of treatment resources. It lies in a defect in the rights-and-duties structure that fails to constitute victims as rights-bearing subjects.

First, under the current disaster safety and victim support system, victims are not defined as rights-bearing subjects who can demand specific actions from the state. They are defined merely as recipients of support. As a result, state responsibility remains a matter of policy discretion rather than a legal duty, and support operates as a discretionary measure granted according to circumstances rather than as a stable guarantee of rights. These rights are also generally not guaranteed in advance. Instead, they must be secured after the fact through the enactment of special laws each time a disaster occurs. Victims are therefore forced to bear an additional political and social burden to secure their legal status at the very moment when they are most vulnerable.

The support system is also structurally fragmented. Disaster response is concentrated mainly in the acute phase, while long-term follow-up and management systems remain weak. Medical, psychological, social, and economic support are provided through separate institutions. As a result, victims are forced to repeat multiple administrative procedures throughout the recovery process. In particular, when support is not established as a right, it can be reduced or suspended depending on changes in budget and policy. This becomes a structural cause that weakens the continuity of protection.

The position of victims is also limited in processes of justice and truth-seeking. Victims are treated as subjects who give testimony, but they are not able to participate substantively in shaping the procedure

itself. Truth-seeking also depends on temporary investigative bodies. As a result, when public truth is not sufficiently established, distorted interpretations continue to circulate, and victims are placed in a situation where they must repeatedly prove the harm they have suffered.

In particular, the separation of psychological support from truth-seeking makes recovery even more difficult. Psychological therapy offered when truth and responsibility have not been sufficiently clarified creates a contradiction: victims are asked to pursue recovery while simultaneously facing a social reality in which their experiences are denied. When stigma and hatred at the initial stage are added, restoration of victims’ honor and social standing is further delayed. Yet under the current system, prevention of recurrence remains largely declaratory, and there are insufficient mechanisms to substantively correct these structural problems.

Ultimately, the core problem is not simply a lack of individual support. It lies in the institutional structure itself, in which truth-seeking, responsibility, reparation, and healing operate separately from one another. The precondition for overcoming this structural limitation is to reconstitute victims as rights-bearing subjects and to design laws and institutions so that truth, responsibility, and recovery operate as one integrated system.

V. Overseas Cases and the State’s Concrete Duties

Overseas legislative examples concerning support for victims of state violence and disasters commonly frame harm not as a one-time “incident,” but as a continuing condition of rights violation. They also reconstruct the state’s duty not as welfare provided after the fact, but as a continuing legal obligation.

- ① Duty to provide rehabilitation without time limits: The state’s duty to protect victims cannot end after a fixed period of administrative support. Because trauma and structural harm are prolonged, continuous support is required.
- ② Duty of automatic state intervention: A system that shifts the burden of application onto victims limits the realization of rights. The state therefore has a duty to actively identify victims and connect them to support systems.
- ③ Duty to provide multilayered and integrated support: Medical, psychological, legal, social, and economic support must be provided not as fragmented services, but as an interconnected and integrated recovery system.
- ④ Recognition of relational harm: Harm extends beyond the individual and includes the collapse of family and social relationships. A comprehensive structure of compensation and support is therefore needed, one that includes these derivative forms of harm.

- ⑤ Codification of victims’ participation rights: Victims are not merely persons whose opinions are heard. They are parties to the processes of truth-seeking and accountability, and must be guaranteed the right to testify, submit evidence, and raise objections.
- ⑥ One-stop delivery system: Administrative fragmentation obstructs access to rights. A one-stop system is needed so that registration is linked immediately to integrated support.
- ⑦ Independent victim support institution: Victim support should not be treated as a secondary function of individual ministries. It must operate as a continuing state function independent of political and administrative changes.
- ⑧ Truth — the right to know and preservation of records: Truth-seeking is not a short-term investigation project, but a continuing duty of the state. Victims must be recognized as rights-bearing subjects, and the process of testimony must be combined with support in order to minimize secondary victimization. Investigation results must not be treated as closed or concluded; they must be reflected in systems of education and memory.
- ⑨ Justice — accountability and punishment: Accountability procedures must be designed so that punishment, truth, and reparation are not separated. Victims’ participation rights must be guaranteed. Recognition of responsibility by perpetrators and truth-telling must be directly linked to legal benefits or leniency.

VI. Conclusion

What remains after state violence and social disasters is not only trauma. It is a question. What did the state do? What did it fail to do? And what must it do now?

The international human rights standards and overseas cases examined in this presentation point to one common conclusion. Trauma is not merely an individual psychological problem. It is an ongoing condition in which the state’s duty to protect remains violated. Healing is not a benevolent gift. It is a right.

Psychological therapy may be the starting point of healing, but it cannot complete healing on its own. Healing becomes possible only when the truth is revealed, responsibility is acknowledged, victims are recognized as active participants in the process, and the structures needed to prevent recurrence are changed.

Responses to social disasters must be understood as one continuous process that integrates truth-seeking, punishment of those responsible, prevention of recurrence, victim support, trauma healing, and recovery. These elements are closely connected. If even one is missing, full recovery is impossible.

Therefore, policies and institutions must move beyond a provider-centered and fragmented approach and reconstruct the entire process around the experiences and needs of victims.

This is what it means to establish victims not as objects of protection, but as rights-bearing subjects. It is also the direction required by transitional justice.

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[Transitional Justice Session]

Speech 1

Sewol-ho Disaster Trauma and State Responsibility :The Question Twelve Years On —What Must the State Do?



Sun-woo KIM

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Sewol-ho Disaster Trauma and State Responsibility : The Question Twelve Years On —What Must the State Do?

Sun-woo KIM | Secretary General, April 16 Coalition on the Sewol Ferry Disaster

1. When Does a Disaster End?

Today, here in Gwangju, the city of May 18, at the Gwangju Democracy Forum, I stand to speak about the trauma of the Sewol-ho Disaster and state responsibility. If the history of Gwangju is one in which victims of state violence have ultimately secured truth and accountability, Sewol-ho is still on that path. When does a disaster end? For victims, a disaster does not end until the state acknowledges its responsibility and reveals the truth.

This year marks exactly 12 years since April 16, 2014, when the Sewol-ho Disaster occurred. The families of the 304 victims have still not received a complete answer as to why innocent lives were sacrificed. The surviving Danwon High School students are now thirty years old, yet every April, their bodies remember that day. Medical research published this year found that the incidence of diabetes and stroke among bereaved families is more than twice as high as that of the general public. Trauma did not stop at the mind. It has made the body ill.

Today, I will speak about the reality of the 12 years of trauma experienced by victims of the Sewol-ho Disaster, the principles of state responsibility, why it is important to ask about state responsibility, and what we are demanding now.

2. Trauma: The Reality of Twelve Years

① Survivors — “Survivor’s Guilt”

The trauma experienced by the surviving Danwon High School students was not a simple fear response, but a complex trauma that shook their entire adolescent development. According to research by Han Jeong-min, Jang Jeong-eun, and Jeon Jong-seol, “Post-traumatic Growth of Surviving Students of the Sewol Ferry Disaster,” Health and Social Welfare Review 40(2), 2020, survivors reported the following symptoms:

- Periodic re-experiencing: Around the anniversary of the Sewol-ho Disaster on April 16, on the birthdays of friends who died, or when exposed to news related to submarines or ships, survivors experienced physical reactions such as abnormal heart palpitations, stress-induced gastritis, and hives.

- Survivor’s guilt: The question “Why did only I survive?” persisted for years.
- Severance of relationships: Life in hospitals and training centers isolated from the outside world deprived them even of the chance to say goodbye to their friends.
- Identity confusion: The name “survivor” became a stigma defining their identity, causing continuous difficulties in the process of returning to society.

According to the 2020 academic study published in Health and Social Welfare Review 40(2), in-depth interviews with surviving Danwon High School students confirmed that trauma symptoms can worsen regardless of the passage of time, and concluded that long-term psychological support services tailored to each person’s recovery status are absolutely necessary.

② Bereaved Families — No Healing Without Truth

The trauma experienced by bereaved families showed typical patterns of complex post-traumatic stress disorder, or Complex PTSD. Mourning the loss of their children became intertwined with a sense of mission to uncover the truth, and 12 years have passed without their being allowed even the time to properly grieve.

- Anniversary reaction: Every April, a crisis repeats. Even now, on the 12th anniversary, many family members are still taking antidepressants.
- Chain triggering: Whenever they encounter news of successive disasters such as the Itaewon disaster in 2022, the Osong disaster in 2023, and the Jeju Air disaster in 2024, they report re-experiencing the day of the Sewol-ho Disaster.
- Secondary trauma caused by the state: Hostile acts by the state—including the illegal surveillance of bereaved families by the Defense Security Command, confirmed by criminal convictions and a court ruling on state liability in 2023; hate speech that described the families as “corpse traders”; and obstruction of truth-seeking—have structurally embedded the trauma.
- Unresolved truth-seeking blocks healing: Key questions remain unanswered, including why rescue was abandoned, what caused the sinking, and what happened during former President Park Geun-hye’s “seven hours.” Experts of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters and clinical psychologists have consistently stated that “complete recovery from trauma is impossible as long as the truth remains hidden.”

According to a Kyunghyang Shinmun report published on September 7, 2023, Professor Baek Jong-woo of Kyung Hee University stated: “The politicized atmosphere surrounding the disaster exacerbates the suffering of survivors. Healing is possible when based on policy responses to prevent recurrence and maximum support for survivors, but the current social situation can deepen the trauma.”

1) Anger Has Not Faded After Twelve Years

Twelve years have passed since the Sewol-ho Disaster. Yet the results of the psychological survey released by the Ansan Mental Health Center ahead of the 12th anniversary were shocking. Indicators of anger, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among survivors improved slightly in 2021, but all worsened again in 2024. The percentage of survivors experiencing severe anger was 36.7 percent, almost unchanged from 40.4 percent when the first survey was conducted in 2017. This means that time has not reduced their pain.

The pattern is especially noteworthy. While indicators for bereaved families and families of survivors show a slight downward trend, only the survivors who directly experienced the scene have regressed. As they enter society and begin their working lives, trauma is triggered again. The support system has failed to keep up with this pattern.

“I am now thirty, but that day still comes back to me without warning. That alone is hard enough, but I also torment myself, wondering whether I still have not moved on even at thirty. I constantly struggle with self-doubt, wondering whether I am using the Sewol-ho Disaster as an excuse, and with the stress that all survivors may be stigmatized because of me.”
— Surviving student A, OhmyNews, April 16, 2026.

2) The Body Is Ill Too

Ahead of the 12th anniversary this year, a research team led by Professor Lee Won-young of Chung-Ang University College of Medicine analyzed 10 years of medical records and published the results in the European Journal of Psychotraumatology. Comparing 388 bereaved family members with 1,552 members of the general public, the study found that even seven years after the disaster, the incidence of endocrine and metabolic diseases such as diabetes among bereaved families was 2.11 times higher than among the general public, and the risk of nervous system diseases associated with stroke was 1.44 times higher. Psychiatric visits were also 1.56 times more frequent annually.

Trauma does not end with psychological counseling. It is engraved deep within the body. The research team analyzed the cause as follows:

“As the Sewol-ho Disaster escalated into a political issue, the psychological pain of the bereaved families intensified, negatively affecting their physical health. Social and political dynamics such as conflicts over the attribution of responsibility for the disaster and victim-blaming can hinder the normal mourning process.”
— Professor Lee Won-young’s research team, April 2026.

It was not only the accident itself that worsened the trauma. The fact that the truth was not revealed, that those responsible were not punished, and that victims were criticized created an environment that chronicized the trauma.

3) Why Has It Not Improved After Twelve Years?

I want to state this clearly today: the reason the trauma of Sewol-ho victims has not recovered after 12 years is not because the victims are weak.

The reason rescue was abandoned has still not been revealed. The records of former President Park Geun-hye’s seven hours remain sealed. The Defense Security Command illegally surveilled victims, and although the court confirmed the state’s liability for compensation in 2023, there has still been no official state apology for this illegal surveillance and other acts of state violence. The final report of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters recorded that the Blue House and the Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries systematically obstructed the investigation by the special committee, but no one has been held responsible.

Clinical studies consistently state that, when the truth has not been revealed and the state does not acknowledge responsibility, fundamental recovery from complex trauma is impossible through psychological counseling alone. The chronicization of Sewol-ho trauma is not a problem of the victims. It is a problem of the state.

3. State Responsibility Is a Matter of Principle

1) The State Created the Disaster; the State Must Take Responsibility for Recovery

The final report of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters clearly confirmed the following: the Sewol-ho Disaster was an event in which 304 people died inside the ship while the Coast Guard failed to issue even a single evacuation announcement and rescued only the crew first. The national control tower did not function, and state inaction caused deaths. The courts also recognized this and confirmed the state’s liability for compensation.

Even so, state responsibility does not end with monetary compensation. The state must stand with the victims until their bodies and minds recover. This is not an act of grace. It is a duty of the state. If the state created the disaster through its failures, the responsibility for recovery also lies with the state. Trauma support is not something the state bestows upon victims. It is a debt the state must repay.

But what is the reality? Victims must find institutions on their own, register, and apply in order to receive support. One of the core symptoms of trauma is avoidance. The most wounded people are placed in the very structure that is hardest for them to approach.

The Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters also pointed this out. Many victims did not even visit the medical support booths because they had no capacity to care for their own physical pain while searching for their families. Twelve years later, this structure still has not changed.

2) There Is No Healing Without Truth-Seeking

Clinical studies have reached a consistent conclusion: recovery becomes possible only when victims understand the meaning of the event, know the truth, and confirm accountability. Sewol-ho victims have not met these conditions even after 12 years.

The records of former President Park Geun-hye’s seven hours remain sealed, and the seven boxes of documents destroyed by the Defense Security Command, now the Defense Counterintelligence Command, have not been restored. Records related to Sewol-ho held by the National Intelligence Service have still not been fully disclosed. The question of why rescue was abandoned has been waiting for an answer for 12 years. In this situation, it is wrong to look for the reason trauma does not improve within the victims.

3) Setting an Expiration Date on Support Is an Abandonment of State Responsibility

Medical support for victims is set to expire again in April 2029. This is the third time, following 2017 and 2024. About 1,000 victims currently receiving support live today in anxiety as the deadline approaches.

“I thought I was okay, but around this time of year, my whole body hurts.”
— Kang Ji-eun, mother of the late Ji Sang-jun, No Cut News, April 17, 2026.

“My body remembers April. The sleepless nights continue.”
— Kim Hyung-sook, wife of Kim Dong-soo, No Cut News, April 17, 2026.

Setting a time limit on trauma recovery is an administrative act that fails to understand the nature of trauma. It is like telling a wound, “Your treatment time is up.”

4) When Responsibility Is Dispersed, Responsibility Disappears

There is one more structural problem in the Sewol-ho victim support system that must be pointed out. The Office for Government Policy Coordination is the general coordinating body, but it is not properly

performing that role. The head of the task is concurrently held by the Director-General for Agriculture, Land, Transport and Maritime Policy. The Ministry of Oceans and Fisheries handles memorial facilities, the Ministry of Health and Welfare handles psychological support, and the Ministry of the Interior and Safety handles system improvement. When authority is dispersed in this way, a structure emerges in which no one takes responsibility.

The investigation report of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters pointed to the “disorganized” structure at the time of the Sewol-ho Disaster, in which more than six ministries and private organizations each provided support separately. The central command body for disaster psychological support must be unified, and its responsibility must be specified in law.

The real problem is not the absence of a system. It is the absence of an entity that takes responsibility. A structure in which everyone is involved but no one is accountable—this is the core issue that has not changed for 12 years.

4. Our Demands to the State

What we demand is not special treatment. We are demanding that the state fulfill its minimum responsibility for the disaster it created. Specifically:

1) Immediately Remove the Deadline for Medical Support

This is the most urgent demand. The Sewol-ho Victim Support Act must be amended so that medical support is provided “until victims have recovered,” not “until 2029,” and the provision setting a deadline for medical support must be deleted. On April 10 this year, Representative Kim Hyun of the Democratic Party of Korea introduced an amendment to delete the deadline.

This time, the law must be amended not to extend the deadline by another five years, but to remove the treatment deadline itself.

We also demand the inclusion of civilian divers, who have been excluded from the official category of victims for 12 years. The Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters recommended that this could be resolved simply by amending the enforcement decree. Four years later, it has still not been implemented. Those whose bodies and minds were made ill after participating in rescue and recovery must no longer be left outside the system.

2) Immediately Decide on Additional Trauma Compensation

The courts have already recognized the state’s liability for compensation. In a lawsuit filed by survivors

in the Jeju area, the court ruled in November 2025 that the state was liable for additional trauma compensation, stating that the deliberation committee had not substantially guaranteed victims the opportunity to testify and that the application period had been too short.

Yet even after the 12th anniversary, the compensation deliberation committee under the Prime Minister has not even reached a conclusion on whether to conduct an ex officio re-deliberation. The administration is not implementing the responsibility recognized by the court. Immediately hold the deliberation on additional trauma compensation and guarantee victims a meaningful opportunity to testify.

3) Completely Reform the Disaster Psychological Support System

The investigation report of the Special Investigation Commission on Social Disasters proposed three key improvements for disaster psychological support: unification of the command system, mandatory psychological first aid within 72 hours immediately after rescue, and the establishment of a legal basis for mid- to long-term psychological support. None of these three has been implemented even after four years.

There is no provision on psychological support for disaster victims in the Mental Health Promotion Act. Psychological first aid is not specified in the enforcement decree of the Disaster and Safety Management Act. Without a law, there is no budget; without a budget, there is no system. These must be specified in law.

4) The Truth Must Be Revealed

Truth-seeking and trauma healing cannot be separated. As long as victims do not know “why,” recovery remains incomplete.

In January 2025, the Supreme Court’s remand decision opened the way for the disclosure of presidential records. The Presidential Archives must disclose all records related to former President Park Geun-hye’s seven hours. The Defense Counterintelligence Command must disclose all seven boxes of documents destroyed by its predecessor and punish those involved. The National Intelligence Service must disclose all undisclosed records related to Sewol-ho that it holds.

So that they are not forced to live without knowing why they had to say goodbye. So that bereaved families are not forced to take to the streets themselves to search for evidence. This is why truth-seeking must be linked to trauma healing.

5) Enact the Framework Act on Life and Safety

The Framework Act on Life and Safety is not a law only for Sewol-ho. It is a law for all victims of disasters and social disasters, including Sewol-ho, Itaewon, and the Jeju Air disaster, as well as victims of industrial accidents and all victims of future disasters.

The Framework Act on Life and Safety has been repeatedly introduced since the 21st National Assembly, but it remains pending in the 22nd National Assembly. It can no longer be delayed.

The Act must guarantee the following: the right to safety as a basic right for all people; mandatory state support for trauma suffered by victims of social disasters; continuous support without deadlines; an active support system in which the state reaches out first; victims’ rights to know and to participate; a legal basis to prevent secondary victimization, including hate and stigmatization; and the establishment of a permanent independent disaster investigation body.

We have demanded these for 12 years not out of anger, but out of a vow to ensure that future disaster victims do not have to begin the fight from the very beginning.

5. Closing

What we are going through together is a story about how the state treats human life.

“Unless the truth is revealed, the suffering of bereaved families does not end. Do not force them to live without knowing why they had to say goodbye. Do not make those who lost their children take to the streets themselves to search for evidence. Enshrine in law the rights of victims and bereaved families to life, treatment, trauma recovery, and truth.”

— Cultural event calling for the enactment of the Framework Act on Life and Safety, April 15, 2026, OhmyNews.

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[Transitional Justice Session]

Speech 2

Trauma Experienced by Victims of the October 29 Itaewon Disaster, and What They Demand of the State



Mi-hyeon LEE

| People's Committee for the Itaewon Disaster of 29 October, Co-executive Manager

Serves as Co-Director of the Joint Situation Room of the Citizens' Countermeasure Committee for the October 29 Itaewon Disaster, while also serving as Deputy Secretary General of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy.

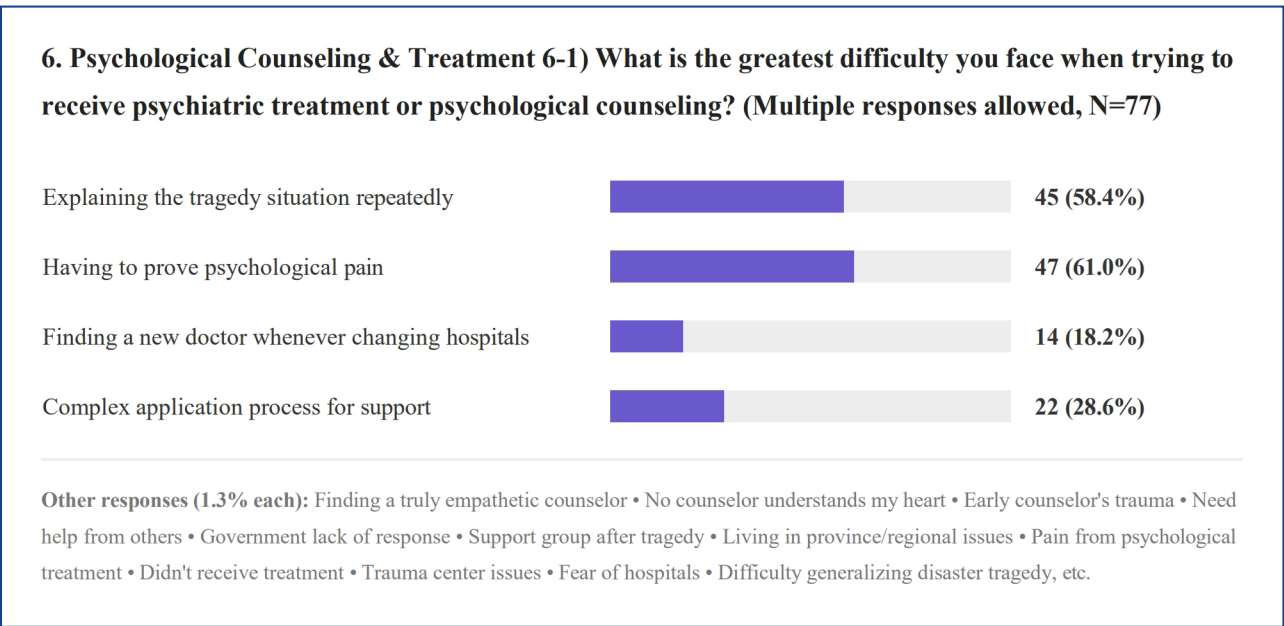
Trauma Experienced by Victims of the October 29 Itaewon Disaster, and What They Demand of the State

Mi-hyeon LEE | People’s Committee for the Itaewon Disaster of 29 October, Co-executive Manager

Three and a half years have passed since the tragedy occurred. However, the truth behind the 10.29 Itaewon Tragedy has yet to be fully uncovered. This does not mean that there has been no progress. The Special Act on Guaranteeing the Rights of Victims of the 10.29 Itaewon Tragedy, Investigation of the Truth, and Prevention of Recurrence hereinafter the “Special Act” has been enacted, and a Special Investigation Commission is currently conducting a truth-finding investigation. However, the investigation is moving more slowly than expected, and public officials are not being properly held accountable or punished. As truth-finding is delayed, the healing and recovery of the bereaved families are also being delayed.

While there are individual differences, many family members say that, after losing their child, they feel guilty even about going to the hospital, saying, “I feel sorry for going to the hospital just so I can survive.” In many cases, family members who have other relatives to support, or who are concerned about a surviving spouse or children left behind, are unable to express their emotions or have sufficient time to mourn. This reality is also confirmed by surveys conducted with the bereaved families.

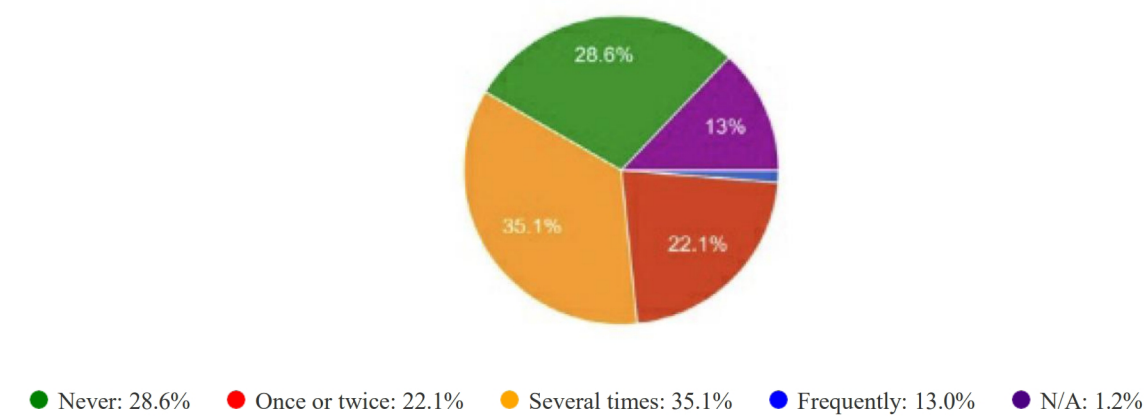
At a forum held in 2025 to evaluate the tasks surrounding the first anniversary of the Special Act on the Itaewon Tragedy, Song Hae-jin, Chairperson of the Steering Committee of the Bereaved Families Association, presented the results of a survey answered by 77 bereaved family members. The survey included questions related to psychological counseling and treatment. Specifically, it asked what difficulties bereaved families faced most when trying to receive psychiatric treatment or psychological counseling, whether they had ever given up or delayed counseling or treatment because of these difficulties, and whether they would be willing to use a psychological treatment facility or counseling center dedicated to disaster victims if such a facility or center were available.



According to the survey responses, bereaved families face significant barriers when using psychological counseling and medical institutions. The most common response was that they felt they had to “prove their psychological pain.” This can be seen as imposing an unfair burden on victims, forcing them to turn their suffering into evidence and prove it. Although the psychological suffering of disaster victims should be recognized as a given, the current system forces victims to continuously prove their pain.

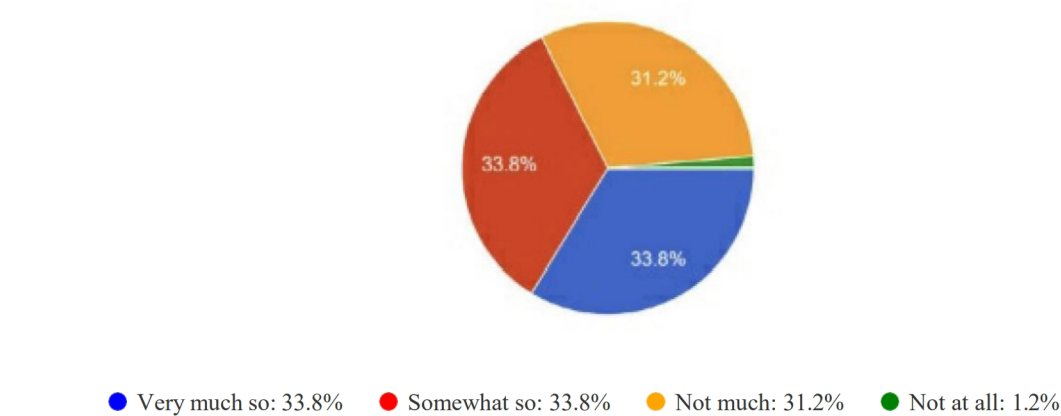
The second most common difficulty was the burden of having to repeatedly explain the circumstances of the disaster. This goes beyond simple inconvenience and amounts to secondary victimization, forcing them to re-experience the trauma. Requiring bereaved families, who are already experiencing extreme psychological distress, to repeatedly relive the moment of loss and pain is highly inappropriate from a therapeutic perspective. Other procedural complexities, such as having to receive a new diagnosis whenever changing hospitals and navigating a complicated support application process, add further stress to victims who are already in a vulnerable state.

6-2) Have you ever given up on or delayed counseling or treatment due to these difficulties? (N=77)



Because of these difficulties, approximately 85.8 percent of bereaved families responded that they had given up or delayed counseling or treatment. This shows that, despite the importance of early intervention in trauma treatment, many are missing the window for treatment because of institutional and psychological barriers.

6-3) If there were a psychological treatment facility or counseling center dedicated to tragedy victims, would you be willing to use it? (N=77)



When asked whether they would use a psychological treatment facility or counseling center dedicated to disaster victims, about 67 percent answered yes. This reflects a strong demand for a specialized support system and shows the urgent need for services tailored to the specific nature of trauma caused by disasters.

One of the characteristics of the Itaewon Tragedy is that there are many survivors and rescuers who were also witnesses to the event, and who continue to live with trauma and psychological pain to this day.

According to the government’s official statistics on the injured, recorded in the National Disaster Management Information System, or NDMS, there were 337 victims of the 10.29 Itaewon Tragedy, including 284 Korean nationals and 53 foreign nationals. However, given that many people were likely not included in the statistics amid the chaos at the time, it is difficult to estimate how many people are still living with memories of the disaster. Moreover, after the tragedy, survivors were subjected to secondary victimization, including being stigmatized as if they were responsible for the disaster and being baselessly linked to possible drug use. In the meantime, they have spent three and a half years in pain, often giving up on revealing who they are. More careful consideration is needed in designing healing and recovery support procedures for them.

It is inappropriate to design a system that requires people to submit documents as if they were under investigation, or to continuously prove that they are victims, because such a system inevitably creates blind spots. In other social service systems as well, when recipients are required to go through complicated documentation procedures, they often give up midway through the application process even when they meet the eligibility requirements. The problem does not end with giving up on the application. It can lead to situations where people fail to receive support at the most urgent moments and are pushed into even more severe conditions.

Support for survivors and rescuers is also a measure to prevent further loss of life. The 159th victim of the Itaewon Tragedy was a survivor who returned alive from the disaster, but died by suicide about 40 days later while suffering in agony. A firefighter who had acted as a rescuer also suffered from guilt and psychological distress and died by suicide even two years after the tragedy. Even if there are no visible physical injuries and they appear to be carrying on with daily life, this kind of trauma and psychological pain is not easily resolved. Separate measures and support are therefore necessary for survivors and rescuers of the Itaewon Tragedy. In particular, healing and recovery programs for firefighters and police officers, who are easily exposed to horrific situations because of the nature of their work, must be designed with great care.

The Itaewon Tragedy involved not only Korean nationals but also many foreign victims. Foreign bereaved families have few ways to access news about the situation in Korea, and language barriers make it difficult even to request information or help from the Korean government. Under these circumstances, it has been difficult for the rights of foreign bereaved families to be properly protected.

Instead of receiving support from the Korean government, we often hear accounts of families leaving Korea without even receiving proper guidance and remaining in trauma. Even when they want to know about the government’s policies or the investigation process, many feel isolated and alienated because they cannot properly obtain information due to language barriers. It was also difficult for them to receive medical and psychological support. Ensuring that the Korean government’s disaster response system does not overlook the voices of foreign victims remains a responsibility that civil society must continue to carry.

The establishment of a social system that helps disaster victims recover and heal shows the extent to which a society respects life and safety and guarantees the rights of victims. However, Korea still has a long way to go. There are many areas that must be improved, including the establishment of a psychological treatment center dedicated to disaster victims, a system that enables continuous treatment, a medical culture and institutional framework that recognize victims’ suffering as a given, and the simplification of support application procedures. Ultimately, we must move away from the current fragmented and complex procedures and shift toward a victim-centered, integrated, and specialized psychological support system. We must now create an environment in which victims can receive the treatment and support they need without being made to suffer further.



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[Transitional Justice Session]

Speech 3

Where Was the State? Neglect and Failed Recovery 16 Months After the December 29 Jeju Air Crash at Muan Airport



Yu-jin KIM

| Representative, Bereaved Families Association of Victims of the Jeju Air Crash

Representative of the Bereaved Families Association for the December 29 Muan Airport Jeju Air Plane Crash, and bereaved family member of victims Kim Deok-won, Jeong Seon-suk, and Kim Kang-heon.

Where Was the State?
Neglect and Failed Recovery 16 Months After the
December 29 Jeju Air Crash at Muan Airport

Yu-jin KIM | Representative, Bereaved Families Association of Victims of the Jeju Air Crash

1. Introduction: The Stopped Clock and the Absence of the State

Hi. I am Kim Yu-jin, representative of the Bereaved Families Association of the December 29 Muan Airport Jeju Air Passenger Plane Disaster. At this gathering to discuss democracy and transitional justice, I wish to ask: Where exactly was the state? As our loved ones were dying at Muan Airport on December 29, 2024, and even now, one year and four months after the disaster, the state has failed to stand with us.

For the bereaved families, time stopped on the day of the disaster. Today, I would like to speak about the devastating reality we are facing and the record of our desperate struggle toward the truth.

The Reality Behind a Disaster Packaged as “Well-Handled”

Transitional justice is the process through which, after a tragic disaster, the state reveals the truth, restores the dignity of victims, and sets justice right. Yet the government has not moved even one step beyond the old practice of rushing to clear away disaster sites rather than confront the truth. It announced just one week after the disaster that “recovery was complete.” But now, one year and four months later, we, the bereaved families, are recovering our loved ones’ human remains ourselves from aircraft debris piled up at Muan Airport and from the end of the runway. As we face the prospect of holding funerals all over again, the bereaved families are left in profound despair.

Times Marked by Concealment and Neglect

The state initially mobilized national resources for a large-scale search. In reality, however, it was preoccupied with pushing the narrative of a rapid recovery and misleading the media with claims that the embankment did not violate any regulations. Just fifteen days after the disaster, the authorities ended all search operations and cleared the site, attempting to cover up the situation with a grand memorial ceremony and the enactment of a special law. Yet the special law omitted the core issue of truth-finding, and even the promised support was not implemented on the grounds of budget shortages. Paradoxically, the label of “the fastest and best-handled disaster” turned against the bereaved families, driving us into social isolation and disconnection.

2. Four Major Problems of This Disaster: Delayed Fact-Finding, Delayed Criminal Investigation, Exclusion of Bereaved Families’ Right to Participate, and the Failure of Recovery Operations

– First, the Investigation Body Lacked Independence, Expertise, and Democratic Participation
The Aviation and Railway Accident Investigation Board, or ARAIB, lost all three basic principles: independence, expertise, and democratic participation. It deteriorated into a subordinate body of the so-called “MOLIT cartel,” protecting the interests of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and the airline while covering up their failures. Most of the investigators were retirees with no experience investigating civil aircraft accidents or former helicopter pilots. They arbitrarily interpreted ICAO international regulations, refused to disclose even a single document to the bereaved families, and used those regulations as a pretext to exclude the families’ right to participate, claiming that contaminated investigation results could affect compensation and damages.

Through strong protest, including head-shaving and overnight sit-ins by the bereaved families, ARAIB was separated from the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport and transferred to the Office of the Prime Minister. Yet because the same personnel and organizational structure were carried over, the investigation has effectively remained at a standstill.

– Second, Passive and Delayed Criminal Investigation by the Jeonnam Provincial Police Agency
In the early recovery process, the bereaved families placed immense trust in the Jeonnam Provincial Police Agency. Fact-finding investigation and criminal investigation are clearly different. Yet the investigative agency relied solely on ARAIB’s investigation results, citing the specialized nature of aviation, and failed to properly allocate investigative personnel and budget. The result was devastating: after one year, only four dedicated investigators had been assigned, and not a single person had been arrested.

At the request of the bereaved families, a special investigation team was established last February and the investigation continues. Yet still, no one has been punished, and the families are left waiting in anguish.

– Third, the Horrific Neglect of Human Remains Caused by the Failure of Recovery Operations
This was the deadliest civil aviation accident to occur in Korea. I believe that the process and attitude with which the bodies of the deceased are recovered are directly connected to the state’s basic philosophy toward its people.

But how were the human remains recovered? Last February, during work to improve the aircraft debris that had been left on the airport asphalt, a section of my father’s shinbone, more than 25 centimeters

long, was discovered. Contrary to the government’s assurance that “everything had burned and nothing remained,” thousands of personal belongings and fragments of human remains were found in the debris, which had been left exposed to rain and wind on the cold airport ground for more than a year. The bereaved families had to collapse once again under the guilt and helplessness of feeling that we had left our loved ones abandoned in a pile of waste.

Eventually, on April 13, a comprehensive renewed search of the entire disaster site began, going beyond the aircraft debris. In just two weeks of work, around one thousand fragments of human remains have been recovered. This is not a simple mistake. It is clear evidence of how rushed and inadequate the initial recovery was, and how brutally the state violated the dignity of the victims.

3. The State’s Promises and the Demands of the Bereaved Families

Standing before the 1,313 fragments of human remains recovered after one year and four months through the desperate demands of the bereaved families, we strongly demand the following from the state.

– First, Resume the Stalled Truth-Finding Process and Disclose All Data

For the bereaved families, the one year and four months lost to the state’s neglect and refusal to act has been a period of searing pain. The state must make up for this lost time by accelerating the truth-finding process and immediately disclose all accident data, including the flight recorders—the FDR and CVR—that ARAIB has concealed since the early stages of the disaster.

– Second, Support a Full Renewed Search of the Disaster Site and Follow-Up Measures for Final Honors

The state must fulfill its responsibility with the determination not to leave behind a single fragment of human remains in the ongoing renewed search. It must also establish support measures for the lives of bereaved families shattered by repeated delays in the investigation and the neglect of human remains, and prepare procedures for the installation of memorial altars and funeral support so that the victims can receive their final honors.

– Third, Secure ARAIB’s Independence and Build the Infrastructure Needed to Identify the Complex Causes of the Disaster

It has become clear that the improper intervention of the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure and Transport led to the devastating result of abandoned human remains. The new ARAIB, now transferred to the Office of the Prime Minister, must break from its past failures and function as an independent investigative body committed solely to uncovering the truth, thereby restoring the trust of the bereaved

families and the public.

In particular, the government must provide full institutional and financial support so that the complex causes of the disaster—including bird strikes, air traffic control, aircraft defects, the embankment, and human factors—can be investigated without leaving any area off limits.

– Fourth, Punish Those Responsible, Without Exception

We strongly condemn the absurd reality that not a single person has been arrested in one year and four months. The special investigation team and the prosecution must indict those responsible without exception and realize judicial justice. We also urge that legal responsibility be imposed not only on those responsible for causing the disaster, but also on public officials who were involved in poor recovery operations and concealment, in accordance with the gravity of their wrongdoing.

4. Closing: Please Hold the Hands of the Bereaved Families

Justice begins with memory. On May 10, the Citizens’ Memorial Altar for the December 29 Muan Airport Jeju Air Passenger Plane Disaster will be established again on the first floor of the YMCA in front of Democracy Square in Gwangju.

To the citizens of Gwangju and Jeonnam, please come and stand with us. Please add your voice and strength so that the human remains of our families and the truth of the disaster are not abandoned in the cold fields of Muan Airport. Please stand with us in the truth-finding process, leaving not a single doubt unresolved. And so that no one in this country has to endure such sorrow again, please hold the hands of the exhausted bereaved families.

Please walk with us to the end, in the spirit of Gwangju, until the truth is revealed and justice is done.

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Journalism Session

Bearing Witness in Conflict Zones : Memory and Trauma

[Moderator]

Young-gil CHAE | Professor, School of Media and Communication, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies

[Speech 1]

From Trauma to Recognition: Conflict Zone Video Journalists and the Role of Public Recognition and Respectful Workplace Culture

Jae-hee CHO | Professor, Department of Media & Entertainment, Sogang University

[Speech 2]

Journalism in Conflict Zones

Philip Cox | Freelance Video Journalist

[Discussion 1]

From Trauma to Recognition: Conflict Zone Video Journalists and the Role of Public Recognition and Respectful Workplace Culture

In-jae Lim | Senior Researcher, Institute for Global Convergence Content, Sungkyunkwan University

[Discussion 2]

The Hidden Trauma Behind the Camera

Bong-seung SHIN | Video Journalist, Disaster Media Center, Korean Broadcasting System

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[Journalism Session]

Speech 1

From Trauma to Recognition

: Conflict Zone Video Journalists and
the Role of Public Recognition and
Respectful Workplace Culture



Jae-hee CHO

| Professor, Department of Media & Entertainment, Sogang University

Received M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Texas at Austin, and previously taught at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and Chung-Ang University. Currently serves as Professor in the College of Media, Arts and Science at Sogang University.

From Trauma to Recognition
: Conflict Zone Video Journalists and the Role of Public
Recognition and Respectful Workplace Culture

Jae-hee CHO | Professor, Department of Media & Entertainment, Sogang University

'26 Korea Association of Video Journalists · Sogang University ReMedia Center for Media-Based Mental Health and Healing

Records and Trauma of Video Journalists in Conflict Zones

From Trauma (外傷) to Award (賞)

Exploring the Role of Public Recognition and a Workplace Culture of Respect for
Video Journalists

— CONTENTS

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01
Introduction

Problem Statement · Research Objectives ·
Theoretical Background · Research Questions

I — INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement and Research Objectives

Problem Statement

- Video Journalists = Frontline chroniclers of accidents, disasters, and human rights violations — repetitive exposure to trauma is inherent.
- Significant role observed in historical events: 1980 5.18 → 2014 Sewol-ho diasaster → the December 3 martial law incident
- Theoretical gap: Journalism trauma research (damage) and professional calling research (recovery) lack integration.
- Need for interdisciplinary frameworks (COR, JD-R, WCT) to link resource flows and recovery paths.

Research Objectives

- Integrate damage paths and recovery structures for video journalists into a single empirical model.
- Examine how public recognition (Hinzpeter Award) and workplace culture facilitate recovery and growth.
- **Goal: Promote the mental health and well-being of frontline journalists.**

I — INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Background

01 Absence of Integrated Framework

While journalism trauma research is abundant, frameworks defining the flow of resources are rare.

02 Suitability of JD-R Model

Captures the intersection of health impairment vs. motivational processes in the newsroom.

03 Utility of COR Theory

COR's "Resource Caravan" serves as a basis for exploring recovery paths and resource roles.

I — INTRODUCTION

Theoretical Background

Review Targets	Primary Foundations	Interdisciplinary Research
Professional Calling	Deuze (2005); Hanitzsch (2018)	Work as a Calling Theory (WCT)
Public Recognition	Nölleke (2023); Kibarabara (2023)	—
Workplace Culture	Eisenberger (1986); Costigan (1984)	Job Demands-Resources (JD-R)
Historical Trauma	Choi (1999); Jeong (2003)	Halbwachs (1992); Alexander (2004)
Trauma Exposure	Backholm; Feinstein; Newman	—
Growth (PTG)	—	Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004)
Resource Flow	—	Conservation of Resources (COR)

I — INTRODUCTION

Research Questions

RQ 1 (Quantitative)

What is the relationship between Award awareness, professional commitment, PTG, and work continuance?

RQ 2 (Quantitative)

What role does workplace respect play in damage vs. recovery paths?

RQ 3 (Qualitative)

How do Award winners interpret and give meaning to their experiences?

02

Quantitative Methods and Results

Analysis of Survey Data from 119 Domestic Video Journalists

II — Quantitative Method & Results

Measurement Tools

Quantitative — 9 Scales (Trauma Experience binary / Others 1-7 Likert Scale)

Variable	Scale / Source of Adaptation	Items	Reliability (α)
Trauma Experience	JTES (Pyeovich et al., 2003)	23	.871
PTSD Symptoms	K-PCL-5 (Weathers et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2022)	5	.891
Job Burnout (Mental Distance)	BAT-4 MD (Hadžibajramović et al., 2024)	3	.704
Respect Climate	Costigan & Schmeidler (1984)	4	.892
Hinzpeter Cognition	Self-developed ¹	3	.878
Hinzpeter Inspiration	Self-developed ¹	4	.954
Professional Conviction	OIS (Melgosa, 1987)	7	.903
Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG)	PTGI (Cann et al., 2010)	10	.825
Intent to Persevere	RRTW (Franche et al., 2007)	4	.795

II — Quantitative Method & Results

Sample — Association Member Visual Journalists

N = 119 · Cases responding to all 9 major variables

Personal Characteristics

Category	Distribution
Gender	Male 94.0% (110) · Female 6.0% (7)
Age	M = 42.3 · SD = 9.4 (27 – 81)
Years of Tenure	M = 13.9 · SD = 8.8 (1 – 32)
Education	Bachelor's 83.8% · Graduate School 15.3%
Marital Status	Married 72.1% · Single 27.0%

Job & Region

Category	Distribution
Affiliation	Terrestrial 64.0% · Gen. Programming 27.0% · Cable 5.4%
Primary Beat	Society 71.2% · Politics 17.1% · Economy 9.0%
Household Income	4.5M – 6.5M 37.8% · 3M – 4.5M 31.5%
Region	Seoul 45.9% · Gwangju / Gyeonggi / Jeju 7.2% each

* Includes one 81-year-old respondent (retired/educational role) · Sensitivity analysis shows identical results for N=118.

II · Quantitative Method & Results — Sample

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II — Quantitative Methods and Results

Current State of Traumatic Event Experiences and Psychological Damage

N = 119 · Online survey respondents among association members

Experienced 7+ traumatic events

75.6%
n = 90 / 119

Experienced 12+ traumatic events

41.2%
n = 49 / 119

Average PTSD Symptoms

3.63₁₇
SD = 1.37

Average Job Burnout

3.71₁₇
SD = 1.23

Video journalists are extensively exposed to traumatic events. Average PTSD and Burnout scores are near the midpoint of the 7-point scale.

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190

191

II — Quantitative Methods and Results

Summary of Results by Research Question

Damage Path

Traumatic Event Experience

→

PTSD Symptoms

→

Job Burnout / Turnover Intention

[RQ1] Role of Hinzpeter Recognition and Inspiration

Award Recognition

→

Award Inspiration

→

Professional Conviction

→

Post-TraumaticGrowth (PTG)

→

Continuation Intention

[RQ2] Role of Workplace Respect and Compassion Climate

Burnout ↓ Protection

Professional Conviction ↑ Boosting

Post-TraumaticGrowth ↑ Boosting

Continuation Intention ↑ Boosting

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II — One-line Summary

Damage and the possibility of Recovery/Growth are observed simultaneously among domestic video journalists.

Workplace Respect and Compassion Climate serves as the "bridge resource" for both paths.

External awards act as a resource for boosting the recovery path.

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II — Quantitative Methods and Results

Path Analysis Model Findings (Summary)

• **Statistical Validity:** All 5 fit indices passed academic standards, securing the validity of the 9-variable model.

• **Damage Path:** Traumatic events positively correlate with PTSD, and PTSD with Burnout. Workplace climate is the strongest buffer.

• **Recovery Path:** Confirmed 4-stage sequential mediation from Award Recognition to Intent to continue field work via PTG.

• **Workplace Climate:** Played a pivot role in both damage and growth paths.

03

Qualitative Methods and Results

Thematic analysis based on written interview data from 8 Hinzpeter Award winners.

SECTION OPENER

III — Qualitative Methods and Results

Qualitative Methods — Async Email Interview + RTA

Data Collection & Participants

Async Written Interview

- Email Questionnaire → Non-real-time response from self-perspective/environment
- Suitability for multi-group qualitative research (Harris et al., 2024)
- Mitigation of time/language constraints
- Analysis via translation (Semantic equivalence)

Participants N = 8 (Purposive)

- Domestic: 4 (P1~P4)
- International: 4 (P5~P8)

10 Interview Questions

Q	Category
Q1	Award Background / Motivation
Q2	Experience Immediately After Award
Q3	Pride & Sense of Calling
Q4	Changes in Reporting Motivation
Q5	Psychological Difficulties & Return
Q6	Organizational Communication
Q7	Impact on Colleagues & Juniors
Q8	Changes in Life & Values
Q9	Significance of Hinzpeter Award
Q10	Other Free Responses

Analysis & Justification

RTA 6 Phases (Braun & Clarke)

- 1. Familiarization | 2. Initial Coding
- 3. Theme Search | 4. Theme Review
- 5. Defining/Naming | 6. Reporting

Sample Size Justification

- Information Power Model: 5-Factor Review (Malterud et al., 2016)
- RTA Standards: N=6~10 Semantic discovery (Wutich et al., 2024)
- Research Purpose: Not for Generalization / Focus on Mechanism Reinforcement & In-depth

III — Qualitative Methods and Results — Theme 2

Attribution of Award — Collective vs Individual

Domestic (4) — External/Collective

P1

"Because many colleagues worked with the same sense of mission, I felt the representativeness and weight of this award."

P2

"The citizens who arrived before me are the hidden heroes of democracy; I am merely a messenger."

P3

"I consider receiving the order to cover the assembly a matter of luck (運)."

→ Reducing self to a member of the collective — Distributing individual merit to the group

International (4) — Personal Accountability

P6

"I see this award as a responsibility, an opportunity to push this story further into spaces where it might be ignored."

P5

"It was a validation of the legitimacy... of my responsibility toward the subject and the issue."

P7

"I will regard this as a promise to remain dedicated to their voices."

→ Confirming fulfillment of responsibility — Maintaining self as the subject of accountability

III — Qualitative Results · Theme 1

Continuity and Changes in Intensity of Vocational Direction

Analysis Overview

- All 8 respondents: No fundamental change in attitude.
- Deepening of professional pride and perspective.
- Award = Reinforcement / Reconfirmation.

P6

"The award did not create responsibility. It confirmed it."

P1

"It solidified the value of my calling."

P4

"I think first about the meaning of a scene."

III — Qualitative Results · Theme 3

Perception of Ongoing Incidents

Response Patterns

- Coexistence of joy and heterogeneous emotions.
- Ongoing suffering of subjects.
- Moral Injury & Survivor Guilt.

P6

"Not simple joy. An ongoing story."

P2

"I would be fine without award if Korea was safe."

P7

"Helplessness... repaying their courage."

III — Qualitative Methods and Results — Theme 4

3 Types of Psychological Support by Org Type

i. Peer Support Culture

P3
"A horizontal culture where we counsel and encourage each other."

P1
"Colleagues shared the pain and offered comfort within the organization."

P6
"Continuous team discussion + 'More open and comfortable' after award."

ii. Systematic/Expert Support

P8
"We receive expense support for professional counseling. Management isn't where we share."

P4
"Hospital treatment and counseling for trauma → 'A necessity, not an option'."

P7
"Consistent support system and open communication with supervisors."

iii. Freelance: External Validation

P5
"I work as a freelance and alone."

P5
"The award had a huge psychological impact by validating the risks I took."

III — Qualitative Methods and Results - Theme 5

5·18 Historical Reference and Recall Modulation — Limited to 4 domestic participants

5·18 Historical Reference

P 4: "The 'unrecorded debt' that remained deep in the hearts of citizens during the 5·18 Movement finally felt somewhat repaid."

"Paying off the debt for past mistakes that went unrecorded, ensuring such a void is never repeated."

P 3: "Knowing the weight of the name 'Hintzpeter,' I wondered if I was worthy... I could indirectly experience the weight of the sense of calling he felt."

P 1: "The symbolism of the Hintzpeter Award as a 'Record of Democracy and Human Rights'"

— Reflecting on "what value my reporting results will hold as historical records in the future."

Two Modes of Recall Modulation

P 1 — Recall Modulation: "Fearing it might become trauma after the award, I actively avoid recalling the past in a 'that's how it was' manner."

"Feeling like I received it on behalf of everyone's efforts, I consciously avoided additional communication after the award."

→ Intentional Recall Limitation

P 4 — Recall Expression + Therapeutic Re-signification

"The thought that I could be arrested by the martial law army never left my mind... recalling that day still gives me chills."

Signifying the award as a "small reward for myself and colleagues who endured trauma... and a process of healing."

IV — CONCLUSION

04

Conclusion

Integrated Message · Discussion of Theoretical/Practical Implications & Limitations · Future Research Suggestions & Q&A

SECTION OPENER

IV — Integrated Message A-E

IV — Integrated Message A: External awards do not generate a new calling but validate existing responsibility, accelerating recovery through direct inspiration.

IV — Integrated Message B: (Quantitative) Mutual respect in organization / (Qualitative) Peer culture is vital, but other psychological support networks are also essential.

IV — Integrated Message C: Workplace respect = broad resource for both paths; External awards = specific resource for recovery. They are complementary; external recognition can compensate for internal gaps.

IV — Integrated Message D & E: D. Qualitative research captures deep historical meaning unlike quantitative research. E. Same PTG scores can lead to different modes: Recall Modulation vs. Expression.

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IV — CONCLUSION

Implications & Future Directions

Theoretical Contribution

- Paradigm Integration:** Merging Journalism Trauma with Calling/Ideology to review recovery pathways.
- Pathway Validation:** Verifying the 4-step mediation: Cognition → Inspiration → Conviction → PTG.
- Resource Extension:** Identifying Communication Climate and POS as critical bridging resources.
- Historical Context:** Applying 5-18 historical evidence to collective memory and professional identity.
- Framework Utility:** Reconfirming application of COR, JD-R, and WCT theories in visual journalism.

Practical Implications

- Organizational Climate:** Prioritizing a culture of respect and support as a fundamental resource.
- Award Mechanisms:** Using external awards as identity boosters (supplementary to recovery).
- Intervention Strategy:** Prioritizing clinical support (EMDR, trauma counseling) for high-risk groups.
- Freelancer Support:** Establishing psychological safety nets and networking for independent journalists.
- Educational Reform:** Integrating 5-18 evidence patterns into ethics and continuity education.

Limitations & Future

CURRENT LIMITATIONS

- Sampling:** Need for follow-up waves (N≥200) to validate complex modeling parameters.
- Causality:** Cross-sectional design limits definitive longitudinal causal verification.

FUTURE RESEARCH AREAS

- Verifying Damage/Recovery paths through longitudinal tracking over time.
- Comparing infiltration of collective memory across diverse professional communities.
- Clinical evaluation of flashback regulation and multi-dimensional burnout.

THANK YOU

Speaker : Jaehee Cho

Professor, School of Media, Arts, and Science, Sogang University

Director, Remedia Research Group

May 16, 2026 (Sat) · Daedong Hall, Gwangju 5·18 Memorial Culture Center

Jointly Hosted Seminar by Korea Video Journalists Association & Sogang University Remedia Research Group

KOREA VIDEO JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION · SOGANG UNIVERSITY REMEDIA RESEARCH GROUP · 2026.05.16

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IV — CONCLUSION

Theoretical & Practical Implications + Limitations + Future Research

Theoretical Contribution

01 Journalism Trauma + Calling/Ideology — Integrated review within dual pathways of damage/recovery for visual journalists.

02 Verification of Recovery Pathways — 4-step direct mediation: Cognition → Inspiration → Conviction → PTG → Intent to Persevere.

03 Climate = Bridging Resource — Applying Organizational Climate, POS, and Identification to resource flow research.

04 Infiltration of 5-18 Historical Evidence — Empirical application of collective memory research to professional identity.

05 Interdisciplinary Frameworks — Confirmed utility of COR · JD-R · WCT · PTG models in journalism research.

Practical Implications

- Priority: Daily newsroom climate** — Respect/support climate acts as a resource for both pathways.
- Awards as Supplementary Resource** — Boosting identity/growth after recovery entry; not direct damage protection.
- High-risk groups post-trauma** — Improving respect climate + prioritizing clinical intervention (EMDR, counseling).
- Journalism Award Bodies** — Post-award psychological support · Separate tracks for freelancers (Networking/Stability).
- Journalist Organizations** — Complementary model: Informal solidarity (Type 1) + Formal support (Type 2).
- Journalism Education** — Reflecting 5-18

Limitations + Future Research

4 Key Limitations

- Sampling/Modeling** — N=119; low ratio vs free parameters. Follow-up wave (N≥200) required.
- Measurement Gap** — Lack of separate scales for official awards vs. daily recognition.
- Causal Direction** — Cross-sectional limits; longitudinal verification of PTG → Perseverance path needed.
- Measurement/Culture** — Burnout limited to mental distance; PTGI 5-factors combined; qualitative N=8.

Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026

2026 광주민주포럼

NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

REBUILDING

DEMOCRACY

FOR A NEW ERA

[Journalism Session]

Speech 2

Journalism in Conflict Zones



Philip Cox

| Freelance Video Journalist

Founded Native Voice Films to produce a wide range of audiovisual works, including experimental films and documentary reportage. In recognition of distinguished reporting from conflict zones, received multiple international awards, including the British Grierson Award, the Rory Peck Award, the Peace Film Award at the Berlin International Film Festival, the Prix Bayeux Calvados, and the first prize of the Hentschpeter International News Reporting Award.

Journalism in Conflict Zones

Philip Cox | Freelance Video Journalist

Greetings, my name is Phil Cox, I'm a video journalist and on the invitation of the Korean Video Journalist Association, the May 18 Foundation and the Hinzpeter Awards Committee, I'm making this film for you here in London, England. I'm sorry I cannot be with you but I'm delighted to discuss with you in this film my work covering issues of trauma, training, working as a video journalist in the contemporary setting both as a freelancer and as a staffer and also in the context of being a 2022 awards winner with the Hinzpeter Awards for my work in Sudan for a film titled The Spider-Man of Sudan. So it is great to meet you all and I think just perhaps to begin with the introduction of who I am and what I have done and what I do and I hope continue to do.

So I have been a journalist and a video journalist principally since around 2003. I've worked globally mainly in Latin America and also Central Africa, East Africa and some in the Middle East. I work both in short-form reportage, so I've worked for films you know eight to ten minutes and then longer under 30 minutes and I now make cinema documentaries or cinema features.

So I think what I bring to work, what I bring to this discussion is a sense of a global community of freelancers, how we navigate issues today of changing threats both in the workplace and in the field. I think the issue of mental health and trauma and well-being, how we look after ourselves, how we work as a team, how we work alone, how we work as an editorial within a broadcaster is all really important to discuss.

So to discuss my relationship with the Hinzpeter Awards, it's through Sudan and I've worked in Sudan since 2004 where I was one of the first journalists to cover the early rebellion there in the Darfur region against the government and I went as a freelancer self-funded in that period and made deep relationships with the rebellion and rebel leaders which cemented my deep access and relationship to that region.

I continued to make work there amongst other areas across the following decade and then in 2016 I'd returned with my Sudanese colleague Doud to do a very difficult assignment investigating the allegations of chemical weapons being used and this ended in complications of where we had a bounty put on our heads by the Sudanese government when we were inside Darfur and although we managed to evade that for a period we were eventually kidnapped by a militia, held hostage in the

desert for some period and then transferred to the government which led to us being put in black sites for a long period and the black site process was I guess fairly textbook where a period of disorientation took place, a period of physical brutality and then a period of interrogation and after that some months of imprisonment without having access to any much knowledge of how long one was detained and what was going on.

And I bring this up because I think it's important to discuss in our work our own relationship to trauma and what I learned during that period both about oneself and also about being a journalist.

And that took me back to being excluded from Sudan after that period when I was finally released but I returned after the revolution, the overthrow of the dictatorship in 2021 and that's where I returned and met colleagues and friends and made the Spider-Man of Sudan which was a very important film winning the Hinzpeter Awards.

And it was about a young activist on the streets of Khartoum fighting for democratic rights and I think I was very much searching to find a character-led story led by the voices of the Sudanese people themselves especially the young generation where there was no presence of a white journalist either in the voicing or on the screen and I think the film the Spider-Man of Sudan was very much for me like an exorcism because my previous work where I'd been arrested the story had all become about me and the Spider-Man of Sudan was about the subject and reaffirmed my confidence to make a film, a video report that had an impact, that had depth and provoked reaction, discussion and change.

Globally people reacted to the report and were informed so I bring up those two things because I think they are very much related and I think first of all to discuss what I learnt in my period of imprisonment and when things went wrong.

I think today and especially the last decade as journalists when things do go wrong it's very easy to criticise, it's very easy to label the journalist as being taking too much risks or what happened and indeed I'm not arguing that there aren't idiot journalists, they do exist, we do exist but hindsight is an easy thing and I think the learning process is very important.

Why I'm here to be talking to you today is because although things went wrong my team and I had prepared with training, with planning, for all eventualities including risk scenarios what would happen and what we do and I think that is so important because I see very much journalists in a way like ocean sailors and I use that analogy because the environment we work in is in the field is inherently dangerous, things can change just like the ocean and the ocean sailor who crosses the ocean, who

works in that environment his strength, his ability is really for me his ability to deal with scenarios when they arise, his preparation. A storm will come one day, it's the nature of the environment so for me the journalist is an idiot or not and did he prepare, did he quantify the risk and is there preparation for the storm.

And I think it's important that when we talk about dangers it's not just we're thinking of bullets and guns, we're thinking of environmental, we're thinking of online, we're thinking ahead and I think you know this analogy with being on the ocean and being a sailor is that nobody criticizes somebody for wanting to sail the boat across the Atlantic, nobody criticizes all the Pacific, nobody criticizes a journalist wanting to tell a story but have they prepared themselves for that journey, have they thought ahead, have they thought what consequences could be when the weather changes, are they able to manage the boat, what happens when the mast falls down, so those things I think are really important.

And I bring it up because in my own work, although my work has received awards and much commented on, I've received also criticism even within my own family who perhaps don't understand the nature of the work I do and so I've had to learn to try and explain the nature of being a video journalist in the field today.

So I see it like that and I think our preparation for work often as a freelancer being individual we feel we have to do it ourselves and I think that causes problems today, we must include our editors, we must include our broadcasters and this is not just a bottom-up process but also a top-down one where I think as an editor we're aware of pressures on editors and how they have to meet their own criteria and stresses.

But the discussion and relationship and understanding how to get a story, issues of safety, issues of not being afraid of risk but learning how to navigate it, transfer it, deal with it, get around it, all these are really important discussions today I think in how we get difficult stories and it's how we achieved to get the story of the Spider-Man of Sudan.

I think in the issue of trauma well I've discussed a bit of my work in Sudan and I told you about my work before the Spider-Man of Sudan which involved my imprisonment and arrest. And I think it's really important about what I learned during that process although I learned lots of things about being interrogated, about being tortured even I think what I'd like to share is what I learned about being a journalist, a video journalist.

And I think it was such an important thing and suddenly I was someone who had always been behind the camera and I had always been interviewing someone who suffered from trauma or had lost everything or been through a dramatic event. That was changed after I came out of my imprisonment suddenly I was in front of the camera and journalists were looking at me suddenly asking very direct questions, wanting a quick sound bite and giving me kind of an awkward smile. And I was then the focus of someone who'd been a victim and I was being interviewed simply because I'd been a victim or a white person who'd been put in a jail and suffered although many hundreds of thousands of Sudanese people had alongside me. I realised what it was then to be looked at by journalists and wanting for a story. And it made me look at my own work and perhaps my own failings in working and dealing with trauma and how we should address it in front of our lens, how we work with subjects, it really radically changed my own approach in how I interview, how I bring up these issues.

So that was very important, the experience of not just being behind the camera but suddenly being in front of it, feeling vulnerable and what perhaps I had interviewed hundreds and hundreds of people over my career in a way that maybe was not always appropriate until I realised what it was like to be in front of the camera. So that's something very much I learnt about working with trauma from that experience.

But then I'd like to go now to discuss the Hinzpeter Awards and my experience of receiving the awards. When I was first notified for the Spider-Man of Sudan that we'd won, of course as a team it was an exciting moment because we had worked alone without funding. I had not wanted to do a short report of three, four minutes for CNN or you know I felt that would simply replicate a kind of stereotype of yes there's another conflict and people are on the street. I wanted to do something a lot longer, a lot deeper and character-led, 22 minutes, 23 minutes and therefore I had to work alone. So it was a risk, myself and my producer.

And Spider-Man was someone who raced around the street in a Marvel red costume shouting at the military police. So of course for me to follow him, I was the only white journalist often there, so I was a target, he was a target. It wasn't the easiest film to make, so to be relatively safe in that structure it was about learning the discipline of filming in these environments, the discipline of filming short, sharp, creating narrative, knowing how to bring an audience into a character and a story.

So that was a real discipline and of course when you work without a commission, without freelance, you never know if even your work will be seen and that creates great pressure because you feel a responsibility and I certainly always feel a responsibility to my subject and the person who is sharing their life with me. They presume because I'm there with the camera that the work will reach a big

audience and of course that can always not be the case. So I think receiving the Hinzpeter Awards and the notification was a great relief, it suddenly gave a validation for our independent work on the front line in a difficult region.

I'd never been to South Korea before 2022 and I hadn't really heard much or known the history of Hinzpeter and Gwangju and the 1980s uprising and the massacre there in Gwangju. So I read a lot and I arrived and was super warmly welcomed by colleagues and fellow awardees and I think even on the second day was then taken to meet the Speaker in Parliament and have a discussion on global journalism, the safety of journalists and the importance of journalists and that for me, being in the Parliament in Seoul with fellow journalists, talking to politicians and the Speaker of the House was moving, it was impactful for me.

Even though I had a 20-year career, I had never been in a political environment where I felt that was sincere. So I was very taken by that reception and then in Gwangju with the awards ceremony, which was very moving, around that, we were taken by the May 18 Foundation to visit the museums, the cemeteries and it became a really rich understanding for me of a community's importance or a society's holding the journalist's role as an important and what Hinzpeter did to reveal the actions of the dictatorship to a global audience which then caused change in South Korea.

So I'd always, I think today as journalists, we're naturally defensive. We've become part of a media landscape which is often toxic, which is often full of propaganda. Even though we feel we do good work, we have to share the same platform as political propaganda, media mogul infighting, ideological wars. So for the public, often all journalism or journalists, we get mixed up into this same bag which can be very difficult for us and it can often feel depressing, one has little self-worth.

But in Gwangju and with the Hinzpeter Awards in 2022, for the first time in my career as a journalist, there was a kind of validation, a warmth and a depth to who we are as journalists and the importance to society, the importance to a democratic society and as journalists of holding those in power to account to the people who put them there. And I think that understanding that a journalist is just as important to any functioning society as a doctor, as an engineer, as a farmer, as a poet, that we are part of that fabric of a society that functions in a transparent way to its people, that the politicians are answerable, the people in power are answerable. And I think the reception in Gwangju has always stayed with me, it's something that's re-energised and I shared with many fellow journalists globally. So I really want to thank the awards committee and the Korean Video Journalists Association for that experience in 2022, which has stayed with me.

I think, you know, to conclude, in the issues of my work, mental health, well-being, trauma, I think one of the most important things is our peer-to-peer groups. You know, we cannot always expect our broadcaster or our employees to be having counsellors and things like that, I think, but what we can expect is our own ability to check in, to support each other, to inquire after each other's welfare, safety, to check each other's planning in all aspects, encouraging, and after assignments, looking after ourselves in a sense of time off, mental health, and just be, it's part of the conversation. And editors and owners should also know that, you know, happier journalists or journalists with energy and drive, we do better work for you. So the issue of well-being and trauma, PTSD in the workplace, which can come from many things, that it needs to be part of the conversation.

Everybody is different in the sense of how we deal with trauma, how we deal with these things. There's no one way that we manifest it. But I think that we must, as the first step, at least encourage and support and talk to each other as journalists, both journalists who've been in the field for a long time and journalists who are just entering the profession. I think that's really important, the peer-to-peer.

So I'd, yeah, just to finally, thank you all again for listening. I would like finally also to thank the Korean Video Journalists Association for a constant sort of communication and support since I won the award. I really hold that dear and special. And also to the Hinzpeter Awards Committee and the May 18 Foundation. I wish you all well. I wish you strong, safe, and care journalism. Thank you.

Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026

2026 광주민주포럼

NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

REBUILDING

DEMOCRACY

FOR A NEW ERA

[Journalism Session]

Discussion 1

From Trauma to Recognition

: Conflict Zone Video Journalists and
the Role of Public Recognition and
Respectful Workplace Culture



In-jae Lim

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From Trauma to Recognition : Conflict Zone Video Journalists and the Role of Public Recognition and Respectful Workplace Culture

In-jae Lim | Senior Researcher, Institute for Global Convergence Content, Sungkyunkwan University

1. Overall Significance of the Study: A Holistic View of Visual Journalists' Mental Health

This study focuses on the job characteristics of visual journalists who record history on the frontlines of major historical events that have changed the course of modern Korean history, such as the May 18 Democratic Uprising, the Sewol-ho disaster, and the December 3 martial law incident. Given that the mental health of journalists covering and documenting scenes of disaster has been a persistent concern, this study is particularly meaningful in that it focuses on visual journalists who directly document such scenes visually.

The study's attempt to integrate journalism trauma research, which examines pathways of harm, with research on professional calling, which examines pathways of recovery, into a single model can be regarded as a pioneering attempt in the field of media and communication studies. It is significant in that it analyzes the mental health of visual journalists on the basis of a theoretical model. The study is also notable for its use of a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, to provide a multidimensional analysis of the psychological distress experienced by visual journalists and the mechanisms through which they cope with and recover from it.

2. Key Findings and Implications

Severity of Trauma Exposure and Recovery Resources: The survey results show that 75.6 percent of domestic visual journalists are exposed to significant risk, having directly experienced seven or more trauma-inducing events. The study identifies a respectful workplace communication climate and external public recognition, represented by the Hinzpeter International Reporting Award, as resources that can mitigate such harm.

The Role of the Hinzpeter Award: "Strengthening," Not "Creating": One interesting point confirmed through the qualitative interviews is that external awards do not create a new sense of calling. Rather, they publicly affirm a pre-existing sense of responsibility and provide an opportunity to re-signify it within a broader context. In light of these findings, it is interesting to note that visual journalists who cover major disasters already possess a strong professional calling as chroniclers of history, and that the Hinzpeter Award functions in a way that strengthens this calling.

Moral Tension and Guilt: According to the study, Hinzpeter awardees experienced complex emotions, marked less by joy than by feelings of guilt, remorse, and survivor's guilt, especially while the suffering of the people they reported on continued. This suggests that awarding institutions should also consider systems for post-award psychological care and follow-up support for recipients.

3. Carrying Forward the Hinzpeter Spirit Today and the Significance of Scale Development

The "Hinzpeter Awareness and Inspiration" scale developed in this study is, in my view, a highly compelling element. As widely known to the public through the film *A Taxi Driver*, Jürgen Hinzpeter is a symbolic figure who brought the truth of the May 18 Democratic Uprising to the world's attention. Elaborating his spirit — the power of a single recorded image to change the course of history — into a measurement tool connected to the professional ethics of visual journalists has great academic and practical significance.

However, further discussion seems necessary as to whether the historical memory of May 18 carries the same weight for younger journalists today as it does for older generations. The discussion in this study would be further enriched if accompanied by an in-depth exploration of how this historical memory is transmitted across generations, and how journalists in the field reinterpret and draw on this historical memory.

In addition, the "Trauma-Inducing Event Experience" scale presented in the study is expected to become a useful tool in the field of journalism. Visual journalists inevitably come into repeated contact with trauma-inducing events in the course of their work. I propose that these research findings should not remain merely an academic analysis, but should be developed into a standard scale that can be used to routinely monitor PTSD-related symptoms among journalists. In particular, if the specific survey items used in the study are disclosed in detail in follow-up studies or field manuals, they could serve as a practical basis for guidelines for the early identification and protection of journalists exposed to risk.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, for visual journalists, an award is more than a simple reward. It can be understood as an act that publicly recognizes the value of the work they carried out despite the trauma they endured and gives them the strength to return to the field. I conclude this discussion with the hope that this study will serve as a foundation for practical policies and support systems that enable visual journalists, who carry forward Hinzpeter's spirit of recording, to fulfill their historical calling with psychological well-being and professional pride.

Gwangju Democracy Forum 2026

2026 광주민주포럼

NEW ERA: 민주주의 리부트

REBUILDING

DEMOCRACY

FOR A NEW ERA

[Journalism Session]

Discussion 2

The Hidden Trauma Behind the Camera



Bong-seung SHIN

| Video Journalist, Disaster Media Center, Korean Broadcasting System

Covered the war in Ukraine on three occasions as a field reporter. In 2025, received the Journalist of the Year Award from the Korean Broadcasting Journalists Association and the Journalist of the Year Award from the Korean Broadcasting Journalists Club. Studied Media Studies at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in the United Kingdom.

The Hidden Trauma Behind the Camera

Bong-seung SHIN | Video Journalist, Disaster Media Center, Korean Broadcasting System

Introduction

Today’s seminar is noteworthy in that it examines the theme of trauma and recovery among conflict-zone video journalists through two distinct methods. Phil Cox’s presentation is a first-person narrative rooted in decades of field experience, while Professor Jo Jae-hee’s team presents a mixed-methods study of 119 Korean video journalists. The fact that the two presentations enrich each other while also maintaining a certain tension is precisely what makes this seminar meaningful. As a discussant, I would like to examine the points of convergence and divergence between the two presentations, and then pose several questions to each presenter.

1. Points of Convergence — The Function of “Public Recognition”

Both presentations point, through different methods, to the same phenomenon: the Hintzpeter International Reporting Award strengthens recipients’ professional pride and their willingness to return to the field. Cox explains that after receiving the award in 2022, he finally came to recognize the trauma his body had been carrying. At the same time, he states that the decisive turning point was the experience of having the social value of journalism affirmed by the public outside the media community.

Professor Jo Jae-hee’s team’s path analysis likewise statistically demonstrates a four-stage serial mediation structure: Hintzpeter awareness → inspiration → professional conviction → post-traumatic growth (PTG) → willingness to continue field reporting.

The core proposition on which the two presentations converge is this: official awards do not create a new sense of calling; rather, they accelerate the path toward recovery by publicly validating a sense of responsibility that has already been formed. This suggests that the effect of awards lies not in external reward, but in a mechanism of identity confirmation. I regard this as an empirical and experiential finding that moves beyond the discussion of ambivalence in journalism awards research (Nölleke et al., 2023).

2. Divergence Between the Presentations — Differences in Context

However, there are contextual differences between the two presentations that are difficult to overlook. As a freelance international video journalist, Cox works in an environment where the variable of a

culture of respect within an organization is structurally absent. In Professor Jo’s study, a culture of respect within the organization appears as the most extensive resource operating across both the injury and recovery pathways. Paradoxically, Cox’s narrative can be read as a case supporting the hypothesis that, when organizational resources are absent, external official recognition can fill that void. This overlaps precisely with the response of participant P5 in the qualitative study, who stated that receiving the award had a significant psychological impact in a situation where, as a freelancer, organizational support networks were absent.

This difference is not simply a matter of individual versus group. The Korean video journalist sample — 64 percent from terrestrial broadcasters and 27 percent from general programming channels — consists largely of organization-affiliated journalists, centered on regular employees with an average tenure of 13.9 years. By contrast, international award winners, including Cox, include a high proportion of freelancers. Therefore, caution is needed when extrapolating the findings of the quantitative study to international video journalists, especially freelancers.

3. Questions for Phil Cox

First, Cox states that he did not hesitate to return to the field even after experiences of torture and detention, explaining this through the metaphor of “the resilience of a sailor.” I would like to ask whether this metaphor, while emphasizing the preparation and training of individual journalists, risks naturalizing structural problems — such as insufficient safety investment by media outlets and insurance gaps for freelancers. This is because the premise that “storms cannot be avoided” may be appropriated as a logic that dilutes demands for structural improvement.

Second, Cox identifies the fact that he “became the subject of the story” as one of his most difficult experiences. This must have been a fundamental reversal of journalistic identity — from the one who records to the one being recorded. I would like to hear more about how this role reversal specifically affected the way he processed trauma or decided to return to the field, and how this experience later changed the way he related to the people he reported on.

Third, Cox states that his visit to Gwangju and the legacy of Hintzpeter led him to newly recognize the social responsibility of journalism. How did Cox’s sense of the relationship between democracy and journalism, as experienced in Gwangju, differ from other contexts such as the United Kingdom or Sudan? And did that difference have any practical impact on his subsequent reporting direction or methodology?

4. Questions for Professor Jo Jae-hee's Team

First, the study sets Hintzpeter awareness and inspiration as starting variables in the recovery pathway. However, is it possible that video journalists who are aware of the Hintzpeter Award already differ from those who are not in terms of professional engagement or career characteristics? In other words, I would like to ask the research team to discuss the possibility of reverse causality — whether awareness of the award itself reflects pre-existing characteristics related to entry into the recovery pathway.

Second, in the qualitative study, the four Korean participants tended to attribute the award to factors outside the self, whereas the four international participants tended to internalize it as a matter of personal responsibility. The research team interpreted this through the cultural-psychological framework of the interdependent versus independent self. However, how do you assess the possibility that the inclusion of awardees for reporting on the December 3 martial law crisis among the Korean participants — that is, the fact that the event is still legally and politically ongoing — may have acted as a situational variable strengthening the tendency toward group attribution?

Third, as a practical implication of the study, you propose a post-award psychological support system for awardees by journalism award institutions. I would appreciate your suggestions on concrete ways to institutionalize such a system realistically. In particular, regarding a separate track for freelancers, I am curious whether the research process suggested any effective forms of intervention beyond networking and financial support.

Conclusion

What the two presentations confirm is that trauma and recovery are not events that occur only within an individual's psyche. They are formed within a multilayered context of organizations, professional communities, and structures of social recognition. Just as the name Hintzpeter carries a special weight in Korea, I believe the discussion shared here today is also a process of reaffirming that the records produced by video journalists are not merely acts of professional labor, but resources for democracy. I look forward to a deeper discussion among the two presenters and all participants.



