COLLABORATIVE GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH KOREA: CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN POLICY MAKING AND WELFARE SERVICE PROVISION*

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This article considers the theoretical significance of collaborative governance and analyzes its empirical examples in South Korea. In most industrialized democracies, collaborative governance is considered crucial to strengthening democracy and augmenting welfare. South Korean governments since 1987 have emphasized collaboration by implementing citizen participation in policy making and the provision of welfare services. As examples of citizen participation in policy making, the article examines direct democracy devices, participatory budgeting, the citizen jury system, and honorary auditors. As examples of collaborative welfare, the article reviews the Food Bank and Hope Start programs and the Local Councils on Social Welfare. The author concludes that the current government’s relative inattention to collaborative governance should be rectified.

Key words: South Korea, civil society, collaborative governance, welfare state

* The author would like to thank Joel Aberbach for his comments on an earlier draft of this article, as well as Chang-soo Heo, Jeongwon Kim, and Jae Min Shim for their research assistance.
Introduction

More than two decades have passed since South Korea accomplished its transition to democracy. Since 1987, South Korea has had five successive democratic governments: the Roh Tae Woo (1988-93), Kim Young Sam (1993-98), Kim Dae Jung (1998-2003), Roh Moo Hyun (2003-08), and Lee Myung Bak (2008-present) administrations. All five governments, albeit with varying degrees of enthusiasm, have placed emphasis on “collaborative governance,” defined as “a governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets.”¹ In particular, the Roh Moo Hyun government officially named itself a “participatory government” (chamyeo jeongbu) and introduced numerous collaborative institutions and participatory measures.

Participation—both political participation via elections and civic participation via associational activities—is integral to the survival and prosperity of democracy. Participation has assumed added significance in democratized South Korea, primarily because of the exceptionally poor status of citizen participation under the earlier authoritarian regimes.

During 1972-1987, citizen participation in South Korea was either absent or coerced. Elections, the most representative form of political participation in an ordinary democracy, were meaningless due to their complete predictability. The authoritarian leaders, either unopposed or competing with state-sponsored puppet opponents, were elected by an “electoral college” whose members were under the government’s tight control and surveillance.

In terms of civic participation, only selected social groups were mobilized in a range of pro-government activities—for example, to increase industrial and agricultural productivity, fight

corruption, “purify” South Korean society, and promote citizens’ compliance with the laws. But these activities by social groups did not represent genuine civic participation, because South Korean civil society at the time lacked one of its cardinal characteristics, i.e., autonomy from state control or influence. Social organizations during the pre-democratic authoritarian period merely served as a one-sided “transmission belt,” relaying the government’s policies to the citizenry at large and facilitating efficient implementation of those policies made and imposed from the top.

When the democratic transition occurred in 1987, South Koreans naturally equated “democracy” with “participation.” Introduction of a direct popular presidential election system, which had been at the top of the wish list of the pro-democracy coalition of the opposition parties and civil society groups, was given priority. As a result, elections in South Korea since 1987 have become much cleaner, freer, and fairer.

Meanwhile, an “associational revolution” followed on the heels of the democratic transition, resulting in the emergence of hundreds, if not thousands, of new civil society associations every year. Unlike the pre-democracy period when social groups had been systematically monitored and controlled by the government via authoritarian measures and policies, civil society groups since the democratic transition have been able to forge and nurture new, autonomous types of relationship with the ruling government.

Two schools of thought that became popular and influential during the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments have contributed to the evolution of collaborative relations between civil society and government in South Korea’s post-transitional period. During the Kim presidency, the New Public Management paradigm, with its emphasis on efficiency, responsiveness, and transparency, prompted governmental actors to explore new opportunities for collaborating with civil society to reform and improve public administration and policy making. The governmental agencies were encouraged and even pressured to delegate

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and devolve as much work as possible to market sector and voluntary sector actors, such as firms and civil society organizations.

Collaborative governance received even greater attention during the Roh Moo Hyun administration. The Roh government, professing to be a “participatory government,” adhered to the New Governance paradigm, with its emphasis on collaboration between the state, market, and civil society. Decentralization, governmental innovation, and civic participation were highlighted as important policy goals of the government. With the continuing influence of the New Public Management and New Governance paradigms, academic interest in and practical applications of civic participation and collaborative governance have steadily increased in South Korea.

Against this backdrop, this article examines two representative forms of collaborative governance in South Korea during the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments: citizen participation in local policy making and the civil society-government partnership in welfare service delivery. I argue that these two forms of collaborative governance in South Korea, despite their apparent similarities in form, developed from different factors. Specifically, citizen participation in local policy making was primarily driven by the popular demand for participation—a legacy of the previous pro-democracy movement. Meanwhile, the civil society-government partnership in welfare service delivery resulted from the underdevelopment of the welfare state during the developmental era of the 1960s-1980s. Because the two types of civil society-government collaboration have different causes, the prospects for their survival and durability differ.

In the next section, I first review the existing literature on citizen participation and collaborative governance, especially in light of the two purposes they are expected to serve, i.e., revitalizing democracy and complementing the welfare state. Next, I examine in detail the origins and contents of diverse participato-

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ry and collaborative mechanisms and devices introduced and implemented during the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments in South Korea. Then, I reflect on the current status of collaborative governance, focusing on their limitations and implications. I conclude with a few thoughts on the future of South Korea’s democratic governance.

Collaborative Governance, Democracy, and Welfare

In the existing literature, collaborative governance is considered crucial for two main reasons. First, civic engagement and citizen participation perform critical functions in consolidating a fledgling democracy and rejuvenating a decaying democracy. Second, civil society-government collaboration eases the burden of the welfare state by providing and delivering welfare goods and services to citizens.

Civic participation complements the role of the existing institutions of representation conventionally available in democracy—most notably political parties, sectoral movements, and interest groups. In most democracies, civic participation—whether it takes the form of voluntary associational activities, formal or informal participation in public policy forums, social movements, or “direct action,” including popular protests—performs important functions of interest collection, articulation, and representation.

In particular, civic engagement and participation make vital contributions to the consolidation and deepening of nascent democracies in multiple ways. First, civic participation helps to detect and identify new issues and interests that have so far been ignored, underestimated, or underrepresented by the previous authoritarian regimes or the existing political parties. Sec-

ond, it provides channels for self-expression and identification that are more proximate to individual citizens, thereby allaying citizens’ sense of alienation and political apathy. Third, citizen participation stabilizes expectations within social groups and thereby supplies the state with more aggregated, reliable, and actionable information with which to govern. Fourth, it inculcates democratic norms of behavior, hence augmenting democratic legitimacy and habituating democracy as the “only game in town.” Fifth, civic participation provides important reservoirs and sources of potential resistance to arbitrary or tyrannical action by rulers.6

Most established democracies have long suffered from plummeting voter turnout and political indifference among the citizenry. In this context, civic engagement and citizen participation can serve as an effective antidote to political apathy and an instrument to rekindle citizens’ interest in politics and policy making. A vibrant civic community, civic participation, and civic engagement are all regarded as important instruments of enhancing the performance and quality of democracy.7 In sum, the existing literature concludes that collaborative governance


through civic engagement and citizen participation effectively complements and reinforces electoral politics in democracies.

Meanwhile, collaborative governance also contributes to the production and delivery of welfare goods and services, thus lessening the burden of the state. Since the early 1990s, increasing collaboration between civil society and the state in providing welfare goods and services to citizens has prompted public administration and policy specialists to appreciate the importance of the nonprofit sector.8

The existing literature underlines either “government failure” and/or “market failure” as a prominent cause of civil society-government partnerships.9 In the advanced market economies of Western Europe and the United States, the welfare state model, which had been in force for decades after World War II, was challenged during the 1980s primarily due to its budgetary unsustainability. As a result, the welfare state delegated various functions to the private sector either through institutional measures (e.g., privatization of state-owned institutions) or concrete policies and programs (e.g., deregulation and civil society-state collaboration).

“Government failure” takes a different form in developing and underdeveloped countries. There, the government, due to a lack of resources, infrastructural base, corruption, and the predatory nature of the state, has failed to respond to the people’s needs and deliver what the public wants. Furthermore, governmental failure in developing and underdeveloped countries is often complicated and aggravated by concomitant “market failure.” While advanced economies could involve market entities, such as private firms, in producing sought-after public goods, most developing and underdeveloped countries do not have a strong enough market sector to perform that function. Under these circumstances, civil society organizations emerge to per-

form the roles that the state or the market ordinarily performs in developed countries, i.e., satisfying the needs of the populace.

In summary, there exists a growing literature on the benefit of collaborative governance for deepening nascent democracies, rejuvenating old democracies, complementing welfare states, and assisting underperforming states. For South Korea, a fledgling democracy with an infant welfare state, collaborative governance has proven highly relevant and crucial. In the next two sections, I analyze how collaborative governance has emerged to become an influential policy paradigm in South Korea’s democratic consolidation by discussing recent examples of citizen participation and civil society-government collaboration.

Citizen Participation in Policy Making

Roh Moo Hyun’s election in December 2002 considerably benefited from the high tide of civic mobilization in the same year. In June 2002, a U.S. armored vehicle killed two South Korean middle school girls. When the driver and the navigator of the vehicle were both acquitted despite their conflicting statements during a U.S. court marshal, hundreds of thousands of South Koreans demonstrated in the streets. Ordinary citizens joined candlelight vigils to protest the verdict; some students even burned American flags to express their outrage. Roh, who had not visited the United States prior to his election to the South Korean presidency, looked far more independent than the other presidential candidate.

From the very beginning, the Roh government identified itself as a “participatory government” and emphasized that it would encourage citizen participation in the process of policy making. Even before the president formally took office, his transition team made a surprise announcement that it would accept online recommendations and suggestions from ordinary citizens for selecting and appointing cabinet ministers. Citizen input was not the decisive factor in selecting ministers, but this unprecedented policy measure pleasantly surprised many South Korean
citizens, who considered participation to be a crucial ingredient of democracy.

Later, the Roh administration introduced and enforced a series of participatory mechanisms and policies that can be broken down into three broad categories. The first category is “direct democracy”; these measures included referenda, initiatives, and recalls.10 Although there had been academic and journalistic discussions within South Korea on the benefits of these direct democracy devices, they were only introduced and enforced in earnest after the inauguration of the Roh administration. The second category is local administration and governance. Examples include participatory budgeting, the citizen jury, and “honorary auditors.” These devices were first introduced in selected local towns and were later expanded to other cities and towns at a steady pace. The last category is online and offline citizen participation; these included initiatives designed and carried out by the ministries of the central government. Successful implementation of these online and offline citizen participation initiatives is part of the annual performance evaluation process for government agencies, which has prompted ministries to adopt and operate them competitively.

During the Roh government, the use of referenda on policy issues and recalls for political leaders were put into force. The referendum as a democratic tool was first included in the Local Autonomy Act introduced in 1994. Yet, it was not used until 2004 when the Referendum Act was passed and promulgated. Since then, a number of cities and towns have held referenda to decide critical local issues. For example, a referendum was held by the cities of Pohang, Yeongdeok, Gunsan, and Gyeongju to select a site for a nuclear waste disposal center. (See the case study by Lee and Lim, “Governance and Policy Performance in Korea,” in this issue.) The recall system has been in force since

May 2006. Some citizens’ associations have used the device to recall their leaders who, against the will of the majority of the residents, abused their authority and made questionable decisions on policy issues.\footnote{11}

Second, the Roh government strongly encouraged local governments to adopt and use greater citizen participation in their policy-making process. Citizens’ participation in the budgeting process increased civilian control of local governments’ budget spending and enhanced the soundness and transparency of the overall process. Buk Ward in Gwangju City enacted legislation in 2003—the Regulation for Implementing Residents’ Participation in Budgeting—to enforce the participatory budgeting system. The ward office has also run several citizens-led research and consultative committees to support the system.\footnote{12}

Another institution that was introduced by the Roh government was the citizen jury system, where ordinary citizens reviewed policy-related issues. This was first introduced in Suseong Ward in Daegu City in 2000 and has rapidly spread to other local governments. In Buk Ward, Ulsan City, the citizen jury played a crucial role in resolving conflicts between the local government and residents on whether to accommodate a food waste management facility local residents did not welcome. The citizen jury held meetings, hearings, and on-site visits to the facility and eventually arrived at an agreement with the government on the location of the proposed facility in the city.

The “honorary auditors” system appoints experts knowledgeable about and experienced in local public administration as “honorary auditors” so that they can observe and monitor local governance. The ministry of government administration and home affairs introduced the system nationwide in 2003.\footnote{13} Responsibilities of honorary auditors include identifying and reporting citizens’ complaints and grievances concerning public administration, detecting and reporting public servants’ corrup-

\footnote{11. \textit{Hangyoreh Daily} (Seoul), July 7, 2007.}
\footnote{12. \textit{Chosun Ilbo} (Seoul), January 3, 2007.}
\footnote{13. \textit{Maeil Ilbo} (Seoul), February 15, 2007.}
tion cases, participating in auditory and investigative efforts by their city governments, monitoring major construction projects, and making suggestions for city development.¹⁴

Lastly, at the central government level, the Roh Moo Hyun government pressured ministries to adopt and operate participatory public administration and policy making through online and offline methods. The Blue House (presidential office) took the initiative to revamp and restructure its home page and opened the citizen participation forum (gungmin chamyeo madang) three months after Roh’s official inauguration. The website provided information on governmental agendas, policies, and goals of the government; received citizen suggestions for improving administrative structures and processes, increasing efficiency of administrative management, and saving money in the budget; facilitated debates and discussions on policy issues; and ran online “communities” to provide experts’ answers to citizens’ questions.¹⁵

Other central governmental ministries followed suit, establishing and actively running similar institutions and mechanisms for citizen participation. For example, the Ombudsman of Korea has enabled citizens to participate in policy discussions and debates, make suggestions for improving the policy-making process, and fill out questionnaires about the office’s policy making and public administration. Other ministries, such as those for national unification, national defense, and foreign affairs and international trade, all use similar citizen participation forums on their home pages. These citizen forums typically provide information on policy making, conduct public surveys, collect citizen opinions on policies, and offer forums for suggestions and opinions. They also help citizens monitor and evaluate existing policies and make suggestions for improvement. Online participation is supplemented by offline activities such as minister-citizen dialogues and committees composed of experts in the relevant policy areas.

Civil Society-Government Partnership in the Provision of Welfare Service

The Early Neglect of Public Welfare

In the 1970s and 1980s, South Korea presented a disconcerting anomaly to the supporters of the then popular “world systems” and dependency theories. The case of South Korea seemed to defy the theories’ predictions that a country could not move from the economic “periphery” to the “core.” South Korea not only recovered from the devastations of the Korean War (1950-1953) but also rapidly soared to become one of the most dynamic market economies in the world, often recording double-digit growth rates from the 1960s to the 1980s. As a result, scholars overseas competitively included South Korea in the honorable roster of East Asian newly industrializing countries (NICs). One eminent sociologist acclaimed South Korea as one of the “four little dragons” in East Asia.16

However, what was clearly absent in South Korea’s “miraculous” industrialization during the 1960s-1980s was due attention to welfare. Throughout the rapid economic development, South Korea’s developmental state consistently adhered to the official policy of “growth-first, distribution/welfare later.” Welfare was neglected, suppressed, and procrastinated; it was largely left to individual citizens and their family networks.

In the 1950s, the South Korean government concentrated its efforts on recovering from war damages and accelerating postwar reconstruction. Public welfare was not one of its main concerns. Instead, the welfare of the South Korean population was left to foreign philanthropic and humanitarian organizations. During the Korean War, in July 1952, representatives of seven major foreign organizations created the Korean Association of Voluntary Agencies to coordinate aid projects and promote information sharing. Foreign organizations built and operated facilities such

as homes for orphans, the aged, and the disabled; distributed relief goods; provided medical services; established schools and hospitals; and advised agricultural development plans.17

After the military coup in 1961, Park Chung Hee’s military and later pseudo-civilian governments legislated a number of welfare-related bills. Examples include the Civil Servants Pension Law (1961), the Public Livelihood Protection Law (1961), the Korean Social Security Law (1963), the Industrial Accident Insurance Law (1963), the Health Insurance Law (1963), the Military Pension Law (1963), and the Medical Assistance Law (1963). Selected elements of the South Korean population—for example, those employed by large firms—benefited from those newly introduced welfare programs. However, most of these acts were intended to mollify political opposition and augment electoral support for the legitimacy-deficient military regime. In essence, welfare legislation at the time was used as a political instrument of the authoritarian regime to increase its popularity and weaken dissidence.18

In response to the increased popular demand for distribution and welfare in the wake of the democratic transition in 1987, the South Korean state built numerous social welfare institutions and facilities during the late 1980s. However, the government focused on funding, monitoring, and supervising private sector actors—such as religious groups, nonprofit organizations (NPOs), and social organizations—that were in charge of operating the newly built institutions and facilities. “Built by the state, but run by social groups” was the main mode of operation for most welfare organizations during the 1980s.19 In this respect,

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the South Korean government’s social policy during the 1980s did not represent any noticeable break with past decades in which welfare had been handled by private citizens, families, firms, voluntary groups, and international aid organizations.

South Korea’s economic crisis in 1997-1998 provided a strong push for increased attention to welfare. During the crisis, a number of major companies in the country filed for bankruptcy, foreign investors withdrew their investment, and the level of foreign reserves fell dangerously low. South Korea was forced to request a rescue loan package from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), which required rigorous and continuous restructuring of the economy.

The Kim Dae Jung government designed and carried out reforms in four major sectors of the economy—corporate, financial, labor, and public sectors. The consequences of the Kim government’s neoliberal “flexibilization” of the labor market—e.g., increased unemployment and reduced job security—prompted the state to realize how weak South Korea’s welfare system and social safety net had been during the developmentalist era of the past decades. Thus, it was during the Kim Dae Jung government that a welfare state finally emerged in earnest in South Korea. Although the economic crisis officially ended with the repayment of the IMF loan in 1999-2000, emphasis on welfare has become an enduring feature of the South Korean economy.

The Introduction of “Productive Welfare”

The 1997-1998 crisis drastically changed the South Korean state’s traditional reluctance to provide for social welfare. The economic crisis entailed extensive restructuring of the economy, which resulted in massive layoffs, a higher level of unemployment, disintegration of the middle class, worsening income inequality, and serious social polarization. The welfare system, which relied on the private sector, was simply inadequate to support the South Korean population in crisis. The government could no longer turn a blind eye to the public’s demand for better welfare and economic distribution. As a result, the Kim Dae Jung gov-
ernment developed and advocated “productive welfare,” expanding welfare services and revamping health/medical policies. The modifier “productive” was used to rebut neoliberal critics who argued that the “anachronistic” emphasis on welfare was contrary to the global trend of reducing the welfare state and would negatively affect national productivity and competitiveness.

Under the slogan “productive welfare,” a series of welfare reforms were implemented. For example, the National Basic Livelihood Security (NBLS) Act, an unprecedented extension of the social assistance program, was passed in October 2000. National health insurance reform was accomplished through consolidating all health funds into a global national fund. In addition, the national pension system was significantly extended to include the urban self-unemployed, the last group excluded from the pension program in South Korea at the time.20

However, in comparison, South Korea’s newly emerging welfare state still lagged far behind its counterparts in other regions. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), South Korea’s public social expenditure as of 2005 was merely 6.9 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), which is the lowest among the thirty OECD countries compared.21 It was lower than not only those of European and Asian welfare and post-welfare states such as Sweden, Finland, Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan but also those of East European “transition economies” such as Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and the Slovak Republic. South Korea was also behind Japan, the United States, Australia, Canada, Turkey, and Mexico. This clearly demonstrates how distant South Korea’s embryonic “welfare state” stands in comparison to the old and emerging welfare states.

On the other hand, South Korea’s private social expenditure

as of 2005 was 2.5 percent of GDP, which was fourteenth among OECD countries. It was higher than private social expenditure in Norway, Italy, Austria, Portugal, Greece, Ireland, Finland, Luxembourg, the Slovak Republic, Spain, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Mexico, and Hungary. This shows that South Korea’s social welfare still heavily depends on the private sector. Despite the efforts by the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun administrations, the state does not yet play a dominant role in providing and delivering welfare services to South Korean citizens. The private sector-based welfare system of South Korea has not yet been absorbed into the state-run welfare system, and many welfare services are still handled by private sector entities.

The Roh Moo Hyun government continued building a welfare state in South Korea under the slogan “participatory welfare,” which emphasized increasing the participation and involvement of citizens and NPOs in the production and delivery of social welfare services. In September 2005, the Roh government announced the Hope Korea 21: Collaborative Welfare program, which aimed at building an integrative and customized welfare service delivery system based on public-private partnerships. The tragic death of a four-year old disabled boy in Daegu in December 2004, which graphically illustrated the weaknesses and inadequacies of the welfare system in South Korea, greatly shocked the South Korean society and compelled the government to strengthen its commitment to build a welfare state to protect poor and vulnerable families.22 The Roh government’s emphasis on “participatory welfare” led to diverse forms of state-third sector collaboration. Civic participation in the production and delivery of welfare goods and services substantially increased the incidences of co-management, co-production, and co-governance.23 Examples

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of civic participation in welfare production and delivery include the Food Bank and Hope Start programs and Local Councils on Social Welfare (LCSWs).

The Food Bank is a program that delivers surplus food to low-income families. In South Korea, the program started as a pilot program in January 1998 and was expanded to fifty-eight areas in July 1998. As of December 2006, 278 Food Bank facilities were active in South Korea. The program was originally initiated by private organizations, such as the Anglican Church of Korea, as a way to share food with the poor. But beginning in 1998, the government helped the program by providing facilities and equipment and funding operating costs. The government began supporting the Food Bank program primarily for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, South Korea was in the middle of an unprecedented economic crisis. The public demand for state intervention to ameliorate social problems was immense and intense. Welfare could no longer be left to the private sector.

Second, the previous Food Bank program had been sporadic and limited, primarily operated by religious groups, such as the Anglican Church of Korea and YMCA. The program needed to be broadened and institutionalized. The Welfare Resources Team in the ministry of health and welfare (MoHW) took charge of the new Food Bank program. The Korea National Council on Social Welfare, City and Provincial Social Welfare Councils, and other local welfare facilities carried it out. The main beneficiaries of the Food Bank program included orphans, the handicapped, the aged, homeless, unemployed, and those affected by natural disaster. In 2006, the Act to Promote Food Donations, containing the basic principles and establishment criteria of the Food Bank program, was passed.

The basic assumption of the Hope Start program is that direct or indirect financial assistance from the state alone cannot resolve the problem of child poverty. The MoHW in 2007 launched Hope

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Start as a pilot program in sixteen areas and incrementally expanded it. Previously, a number of private organizations, such as the Joongang Daily, the Korea Welfare Foundation, and the Community Chest of Korea, collaborated to launch the We Start movement to help the children of poor families. The We Start movement aimed to ease the intergenerational perpetuation of poverty. In particular, the movement built We Start Villages in numerous cities and towns of South Korea. These special villages were funded by local firms, citizen donations, and support from local governments. In these villages, local governments, schools, welfare facilities, hospitals, NGOs, and ordinary residents cooperate to help alleviate poverty of young children.

The government-run Hope Start program incorporates and expands on the existing We Start movement. The principal purpose is to provide educational and welfare services to the children of poor families so that they enjoy a “fair start line” compared with the children from higher-income families. The MoHW is in charge of implementing Hope Start. The Support Team for Planning and Educational Programs include specialists in welfare issues who advise in selecting locations and developing various specific programs. In selected locations, the Hope Start teams develop and provide an integrative welfare service program, making a package of health, welfare, and education available to children from poor families. The Hope Start teams can also request the use of social welfare facilities, nurseries, hospitals and health clinics, and NGOs in the region. The beneficiaries of the Hope Start program include pregnant women of low-income households and children under the age of twelve in vulnerable areas. Teams of social welfare specialists and nurses regularly visit families and provide services such as medical checkups and educational programs. The program provides children with services integrating health, welfare, and nurture and provides their parents with job training and employment opportunities. In contrast to the existing private-sector programs focused on solving problems after they occur, this program emphasizes prevention of problems in nutrition, emotional development, and social skills of the children from poor families using an integrated
package of methods.

In the past, local governments, NPOs, and hospitals have provided welfare services individually in South Korea, without much coordination or cooperation. There existed no linking or collaborative mechanisms between the public and private sectors. There was a lot of overlap and omission in terms of providing necessary welfare services. There were state-created and state-sponsored committees on social welfare, but they did not function very well. LCSWs are a response to the traditional absence of coordination between the government and NPOs. Experts had repeatedly pointed to the importance of establishing and developing a collaborative forum in which NPO and governmental representatives, welfare experts, and practitioners could all participate and discuss welfare matters to provide better and more integrated services to residents.

In 2001-2002, LCSWs were established as a pilot program in fifteen cities and towns. Based on the success of these pilot councils, in July 2003, the existing Social Welfare Program Act was revised: The existing state-dominant Social Welfare Committees were replaced by LCSWs. By March 2006, all cities and towns in South Korea established LCSWs. These councils are composed of experts who are knowledgeable about welfare and health issues, representatives from voluntary organizations and institutions engaged in social service provision, and relevant public officials, thus ensuring broad representation and diversity of participants. In thirty-four cities and towns, local councils employ executive secretaries from the private sector, who are actively nurturing and reinforcing collaboration between the local government and NPOs to explore welfare-related resources in the area. More and more councils are expected to hire staff from the private sector.25

The main functions of LCSWs are to discuss and deliberate on major welfare-related issues and plans pertaining to the region and promote linkage and integration between social welfare and medical service, with a view to enhancing overall welfare in the

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local region and building a workable “new governance” system between the public and the private sectors. LCSWs in South Korea, by actively involving and incorporating local NPOs in the policy-making process related to the provision of social welfare services, facilitate and enrich communication channels between NPOs (providers) and residents (users). Citizens and NPOs are involved in multiple stages of the decision-making process—not only the implementation stage but also the agenda-setting and evaluation stages. LCSWs are expected to contribute to the establishment and evolution of a “new governance” system and the augmentation of social capital in South Korea.

Reflections on Collaborative Governance in South Korea

As was discussed above, the “participatory government” of Roh Moo Hyun introduced a number of participatory mechanisms and devices in the political and economic realms to deepen democratic institutions and to promote the development of an infant welfare state. However, there are several problems with the existing participatory mechanisms and devices.

First, most of the participatory institutions and programs, both in the political (democracy-promotion) and economic (welfare-promotion) realms, have largely been initiated, led, and managed by the state. The process, most of the time, was top-down in nature. The Roh government, constantly frustrated by the opposition party and its allies in the National Assembly, often used popular participation mechanisms to broaden its support basis, bolster its legitimacy, and facilitate policy implementation. Because the emphasis on civic participation was essentially propelled by such political motives and because participation was promoted through state-led campaigns, it remains to be seen how many of the newly introduced participatory measures will survive the conservative Lee Myung Bak government.

Second, most of the participatory programs are limited to a certain stage of the policy-making process. In terms of the participatory mechanisms in the political field, most of the new
devices are concentrated in the agenda-setting stage. What the government tries to do is collect citizen suggestions and opinions that cannot be adequately expressed through regular elections and incorporate them into the policy-making process. By contrast, in terms of welfare-promoting participatory mechanisms, most of the initiatives are focused on the implementation stage. Although the latest examples like the LCSWs attempt to enhance co-governance between policy makers and citizens in the area of public welfare matters, most of the civic participation measures introduced so far have concentrated on the production and delivery of welfare goods and services, without due attention to citizen empowerment and access to the policy-making process. As a result, in both democracy-promoting and welfare-providing participatory programs, the other stages of policy making, such as policy evaluation, do not yet involve significant civic participation.

Moreover, most of the participatory mechanisms and devices introduced so far in South Korea are limited to basic functions such as information sharing and consultation. The “participatory” mechanisms and forums have been used by the government to provide relevant information to citizens and for citizens to suggest opinions and concerns to the government. But it is doubtful whether these informational and consultative forums will lead to active citizen participation. In this regard, it is essential to institutionalize the existing participatory mechanisms. Because some of the mechanisms introduced remain ad hoc in nature, it is possible for future governments to dispense with those mechanisms and devices. For civic participation to perform many crucial democracy-promoting and welfare-providing functions, it is essential to reorganize the existing governmental ministries so as to accommodate citizen input and civic participation more effectively and on a more regular basis. In addition, the degree, scope, quality, and efficacy of the incorporation of civic participation must be seriously considered when evaluating the performance of governmental ministries and public officials.
Conclusion and Prospects

This article examined two primary areas in which the South Korean governments’ emphasis on “collaborative governance” has played out in the post-transitional period, i.e., democracy promotion and welfare improvement. In both areas, there have been critical changes and developments over the past two decades, particularly during the Kim Dae Jung and the Roh Moo Hyun administrations. How enduring will these changes and developments be?

Since its inauguration in February 2008, Lee Myung Bak’s conservative government in South Korea has implemented several critical policy changes. In terms of economic policy, a high priority has been accorded to economic growth through privatization, deregulation, and “business-friendly” measures. The stress on state welfarism, which was the hallmark of the previous two governments, has been significantly abated. The Lee government’s fundamental approach to the economy is guided by the “trickling down” of an “enlarged pie” resulting from overall economic growth. Big business has been encouraged to lead the nation’s economy as the main engine of the national drive for growth and global competitiveness.

Under Lee’s government, the previous Roh government’s initiatives on collaborative governance and civic engagement have been scaled back substantially. Lee’s slogans of economic growth and industrial competitiveness have largely eclipsed the emphasis on democracy and welfare. Civic participation, which had been pivotal in promoting democracy and improving welfare during the previous governments, has been deemphasized accordingly. In this regard, serious skepticism and concern about continued institutionalization and stabilization of the previously introduced participatory measures seem justified.

Undervaluing civic participation and scrapping participatory mechanisms and devices, however, will probably invite a strong popular backlash. The main drive for the formidable tide of “collaborative governance” originated from the two great transformations in South Korean politics and economy: One was the
democratic transition in the 1980s and the other was the economic crisis in the 1990s. The need to deepen democracy and develop a welfare state compelled the South Korean government to underscore participation and institutionalize participatory mechanisms and devices. The historically rooted emphasis on participation will not easily disappear. This is particularly so because South Korea’s democratization was enabled by the persistent struggle of civil society groups and citizens’ active participation in pro-democracy campaigns. A grand coalition of civil society groups, such as student organizations, labor unions, and religious associations, played crucial roles in expelling the authoritarian regime and facilitating democratization in South Korea. If the ruling government fails to provide an adequate “participatory outlet” for the traditionally strong and contentious civil society in South Korea, the participatory impulse will likely erupt into direct action and possibly violent protests.26 Popular protests engulfed the entire nation just a few months after Lee’s inauguration, during the summer of 2008, over the safety of U.S. imported beef. Strong popular demand for civic participation can erupt at any time, especially as Lee’s administration obstinately pursues economic growth and competitiveness at the cost of economic distribution and welfare.

Increasing instances of civic participation and civil society-state collaboration in both democracy promotion and welfare provision in major industrialized democracies clearly demonstrate that, in the rapidly globalizing world today, it is difficult for the government to deal with all policy issues alone. It is imperative to involve civil society and engage citizens in the policy-making process, facilitating and deepening collaboration between the state and other sectors. Civil society-state collaboration is important for making democracy work better, resolving socioeconomic problems more effectively, and increasing national competitiveness.

In conclusion, competent management and utilization of civic participation and civil society-state collaboration will prove to be the key to effective governance in the years to come. Civic participation and civil society-state collaboration in South Korea will also serve as an important mechanism of “normalizing” the South Korean state. Shedding the past (economically) developmental and (politically) authoritarian legacies, the South Korean state is gradually learning to collaborate and cooperate with civil society organizations and ordinary citizens to strengthen the new democracy and the weak welfare system. By participating in an increasingly tighter web of state-civil society interaction and cooperation, citizens and voluntary organizations will contribute to increasing the transparency, responsiveness, and accountability of their government and improving the quality of the policy-making process. The resulting South Korean democracy, with extensive and effective civic participation in crucial policy areas, will be far stronger.27 A serious backslide into authoritarian decision making and growth-first developmentalism, if it is indeed taking place under the current government of Lee Myung Bak, will most likely rekindle intense popular demand for civic participation in South Korea.

Principal References


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