

Statement from Professors in North America Concerned about Korean Democracy

10 June 2009

The following represents the considered view of professors at colleges and universities throughout North America whose thoughts are with Korea and Korea's democracy. In light of recent developments in South Korea, we, the undersigned, cannot but express grave concern. Nurtured by the toils and sacrifice of many, democracy is a proud asset of the Korean people. The world has watched as the Korean people have moved deliberately, with determination and at human cost, from dictatorship toward democracy, over the last half a century. Regrettably, since the inauguration of the President Lee Myung-bak administration, Korean democracy has lost its way.

A democracy must not only allow the people to select their own representatives through votes but also guarantee the freedoms of assembly and association in order that they can express diverse political opinions. We have observed how the power of the state suppressed last year's "candlelight vigils," has issued subpoenas even to ordinary citizens who had participated in the protests, and is restricting the lively online exchange of ideas. The recent police blockade of Seoul Square is an egregious example of the government denying its people a fundamental democratic right, the freedom to assemble.

A democracy acquires a capacity for self-regulation through the free press. We note with distress that the Public Prosecutor's Office has questioned journalists critical of the government, and the replacement of major broadcasting networks' executives with pro-government figures has infringed upon the professional autonomy of rank-and-file reporters. A foundation stone of a democracy, the free and independent press has suffered serious damage.

The Constitution of the Republic of Korea enshrines a system of checks-and-balances among the executive, the legislative, and the judicial branches of the government. We regretfully recognize and call attention to the fact that since its inauguration, the government has not upheld the principle of checks-and-balances. Moreover, such administrative organs as the Public Prosecutor's Office, the police, and the National Tax Service that must remain politically neutral have exercised excessive state power in an arbitrary manner, weakening the legitimacy of democratic governance.

Speaking for North American professors interested in the health and strength of democracy in Korea, we express deep concern over the regression of democracy in Korea. Heart-wrenching incidents such as the death of forced evictees during the police suppression of their protest, the suicide of special contract workers, and the shocking decision by the former president to end his own life are some of the tragic consequences of a democracy that is taking backward steps in Korea; they highlight a democracy in crisis.

A democratically elected government cannot disparage its own people, because the mandate to govern derives from the people. We, the undersigned, urge the government of President Lee Myung-bak to recognize its responsibility for the democracy that has regressed and reorient itself as a government that respects the people's sovereignty and democratic rights. The democracy, the pride of Korea, must again find its direction and return to the natural path of serving the people.