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**ELECTRONIC ADVOCACY BY NONGOVERNMENTAL  
ORGANIZATIONS IN KOREA: CHANGING THE PRACTICE  
OF POLITICAL ADVOCACY**

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Prepared for the 2001 INDEPENDENT SECTOR Spring Research Forum

*The Impact of Information Technology on Civil Society:  
How will online innovation, philanthropy, and volunteerism serve the common good?*

Washington, DC  
March 15 – 16, 2001

# **Electronic Advocacy by Nongovernmental Organizations in Korea: Changing the Practice of Political Advocacy**

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## I. Introduction

Advocacy has always been an important function of the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Korea. These efforts have often thrust NGOs against powerful players in the for-profit and government sectors, making their relationships somewhat strained over the years (Kim, 1999a). In the forefront of such advocacy activities in Korea are the civil society organizations (CSOs). CSOs are a subset of NGOs that are engaging primarily in 'public interest seeking' activities. These activities include monitoring public and corporate sector activities, protecting the environment and consumers as well as minorities, educating the public on civil society, and generally raising public awareness on various economic, political, and social issues. They are mostly small to medium-sized organizations, largely voluntary, and they rely on private donations for their operation (Kim, 1999a). They are often divided into two types: 'soft' organizations that were set up prior to the 1980's, which tend to take more conservative approaches in terms of their campaigning style; and 'hard' organizations that are involved in more radical civic movements. The majority of the latter type was created in the 1990s and are often called civic movement organizations (CMIC, 1999).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Civil Movement Information Center (1999), 62 percent of CSOs surveyed were created in the 1990s while 18.4 percent were set up in the 1980's.

Although they have been highly visible in the public political culture over the past few years by capturing virtually the exclusive attention of the media in comparison to other nonprofit types of organizations, their success has been limited to particular policy areas. Mostly they were successful in protecting minority shareholders' rights, providing protection to endangered species, making the budgeting process more transparent, and controlling the growth of the public sector. Other advocacy activities seeking to address broader social and economic issues, ranging from welfare program reform to political reform, were met with limited success as they had little financial support and were heavily dependent upon the traditional media for their coverage of campaigns.

Now, new technology is revolutionizing the practice of advocacy activities in Korea, giving rise to the new term cyber advocacy, or electronic advocacy. Electronic advocacy is defined as "the use of technologically intensive media as a means to influence stakeholders to effect policy change (FitzGerald and McNutt, 1997)." In particular, the electronic-mail-based and web-based techniques are viewed as vehicles for educating individuals, stimulating citizen participation, measuring public opinion, easing citizen access to government, offering a public forum, simplifying voter registration, and even facilitating actual voting (Corrado and Firestone, 1996). They have been termed a "powerful technology for grassroots democracy," which by facilitating discussions and collective action by citizens strengthen

democracy (Klein, 1995). In addition, Schawaz (1996) called the Internet "the most powerful tool for political organizing developed in the past fifty years."

The most common use of electronic advocacy is to increase and at the same time control the flow of information available to the average citizens as well as lowering communications costs. In addition, e-mail-based techniques enable broader participation of the citizens. This, in turn, enables participatory democracy to prevail in the society. The issue we seek to address in this paper is the marriage of online advocacy with CSOs. A case in point is the 'cyber-electioneering' during the last parliamentary election in April, 2000. Korea went through a whirlwind of campaigns last April and the new technologies influenced the minds of voters like no political speech or rally ever did. The event was important for at least two reasons: First, the blacklist of 'unqualified' politicians was announced on the Internet, which has fundamentally altered the way in which these civic groups influence the political and election process; and second, the electronic advocacy techniques have enabled CSOs to form coalitions which were not possible with conventional advocacy techniques.

## II. Citizens Alliance for the Year 2000 General Elections (CAGE)

An alliance of 473 CSOs (later growing to over 900 organizations) was formed in mid-January 2000 to list a group of 114 entrenched politicians whom they considered "corrupt, inept and unqualified," including 67 who occupied seats in the 299-member

Assembly at the time. The list was posted despite a law banning the political activities of NGOs and against the warnings of the National Election Commission and government prosecutors. Soon after, the group engaged in civil disobedience as political parties failed to take note of the Alliance's warning by nominating those candidates included on the "blacklists." The Alliance's blacklists of "unfit" politicians included many political heavyweights who have survived different political power shifts and governments over the decades by various means. Such a civic movement was the first of its kind in Korean political history and it surprised many that such a large number of organizations formed a solid front against the entrenched political elite.

By examining the internal documents, it appears that the Alliance sought to achieve the following objectives: First, to reform the Korean political culture by "rejecting" those politicians that were "unfit" to stand in the election; second, to increase voter participation, especially among the young voters; and third, to monitor the election to ensure a clean and transparent process.

Although the Alliance utilized both conventional and electronic advocacy techniques<sup>2</sup> in order to maximize its campaigning effectiveness, it has stressed both the e-mail-based and the web-based techniques as critical vehicles for educating voters, stimulating

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<sup>2</sup> According to McNutt and Boland (1999), electronic advocacy encompasses a "wide range of techniques including electronic-mail-based techniques (individual e-mail, discussion lists, newsgroups, and similar tolls), web-based techniques (web-sites and other web-based tools); and a range of related techniques such as fax, conference calling, video teleconferencing, and so forth."

citizen participation in the election, measuring public opinion, and offering a public forum.

This is reflected in the contents of its web-site ([www.ngokorea.org](http://www.ngokorea.org)) which included news announcements, advocacy advertisements, discussion bulletin boards, and cyber-marketing.

In addition, the CAGE successfully demanded and subsequently obtained the details of candidates' military service, tax payments and criminal records, and provided this information to the voters, an immeasurable contribution.

Overall, the Alliance's drive was a success considering the adverse circumstances under which they were operating. In total, 59 of the 86 candidates the Alliance marked for rejection suffered defeats in the April 13<sup>th</sup> polls, a 68.4% rejection rate. Out of 22 candidates who were classified in the "most detested list," meaning that the CAGE put together more resources for the "rejection" campaigning, 15 were not elected, recording a 68.2% rejection rate. In the Seoul Metropolitan area, where most close races took place, 19 out of 20 candidates who were blacklisted by the CAGE were not elected, recording a phenomenal 95.5% rate. Table 1 summarizes the Alliance's record by regional breakdown.

Table 1: Regional Breakdown of the Effectiveness of the Alliance's Work

Area	Rejected/Blacklisted Candidates	Percentage
Seoul Metropolitan	19/20	95.5%
Chungjeong/Kangwon	18/23	78.3%
Cholla-do	16/35	45.7%
Kyungsang-do	6/8	75%
Total	59/86	68.6%(average)

Source: CAGE (2000a)

Since the CAGE declared a "rejection campaign" for the last parliamentary elections, various segments of society have responded in different ways. It may be premature to conclude whether the campaign's impact has been good or bad for Korean politics and the future of the nation, but there certainly seems to be more reason to be optimistic than to fret about worries of a breakdown in law and order. At least it made Koreans consider and debate the age-old illnesses of Korean politics, particularly excessive pandering to regional loyalty by candidates and the undemocratic, backroom decision-making of political parties.

### III. Factors Influencing the Alliance Campaign Effectiveness

It is instructive to dissect the outcome of the Alliance activities and, in particular, the role of the both electronic-mail-based and web-based techniques in aiding the cause of the CAGE and its activities. Numerous factors have played important roles and they are as follows:

#### 1) Information and Telecommunications Infrastructure

In analyzing factors influencing the Alliance's work, it is important to examine Korea's current status on the use of and infrastructure for information and communications technologies. Since more than a third of Korea's 47 million people are logged onto the

Internet, making it one of the highest ratios of web access in the world<sup>3</sup>, the Alliance was able to implement their electronic advocacy idea with ease. More importantly, the number of installed high-speed internet connections such as cable modems and ADSL has reached the 3 million figure, as compared to 6 million in the U.S. and 0.45 million for Japan in early 2000 (Ministry of Information and Communications: MIC).<sup>4</sup> In percentage terms, Korea ranks among the highest. Cable connection and ADSL access is common and relatively inexpensive.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the CAGE has benefited from an abundance of programmers and web-designers who volunteered for the cause.

## 2) Agenda Setting and Issue Generation

The Alliance has strategically utilized appropriate information and communications technologies (ICTs) to focus on an issue which most Koreans were concerned about, namely political reform. The ICTs have played a pivotal role in (1) framing the issue by providing in-depth coverage of the current woes of the system, unlike the traditional media, (2) promoting broader participation of citizens, and (3) promoting these reform-related issues through targeting "unfit" politicians. In addition, by taking an issue-oriented approach to campaigning rather than covering comprehensive or all-encompassing issues, the Alliance

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<sup>3</sup> The ratio of the population with access to the Web for Korea is 34%, Taiwan 18%, Hong Kong 17%, Japan 14%, China 0.7%, according to e-Marketer (2000).

<sup>4</sup> According to the MIC, the number has increased to 4 million at the end of 2000, an equivalent of one in every four households.

<sup>5</sup> Major telecommunications companies and the MIC aggressively marketed high-speed connection technology. The monthly charge ranges from \$30 to \$50 with an unlimited access to the Internet.

was able to focus on a number of implementable ideas. This approach attracted ordinary citizens as well as the attention of the traditional mass media.<sup>6</sup> As a result, over 910,000 people visited the site between January 13<sup>th</sup> and April 13<sup>th</sup> of 2000, and over 29,000 signed a petition supporting the cause of the CAGE. Also, 195,199 voters signed a pledge to take part in the election process while 25,122 people took part in the on-line discussion groups. The Alliance's cyber-marketing was also successful as over 277 million Won were raised for the cause.

### 3) Cyber-Strategies

The CAGE employed "cyber-politicking" in order to entice the netizens<sup>7</sup>, mostly in their 20s and 30s, who made up 57 percent of all voters. So-called "cyber-politics" had burst into full blossom ahead of the election, opening a new political era, and almost instantly replaced the traditional electioneering characterized by taking to the streets for direct contact with voters. As a result, a number of interesting political web-sites have been in operation since the early last year.<sup>8</sup>

With more and more people interested in obtaining information from the Internet, the Alliance effectively organized its campaigning along the cyber-front. In addition, the

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<sup>6</sup> 2,974 articles were written about the activities of the CAGE in major Korean newspapers during the election period.

<sup>7</sup> A term that refers to Internet users. It combines words Internet and citizens.

<sup>8</sup> These include a site called "emocracy," which offers information on candidates and cyber mock balloting and "pib (political information bank) korea," which provides up-to-date political news.

strategy of targeting young netizens was largely successful as they not only had fast access to the Internet world but also were seen as undecided voters, often favoring independents and less subject to regional antagonism. Rather than concentrating on older generations who tended to vote along regional lines, the young netizens were more open to change and hence were targeted. Instead of taking it to the street, a method only appropriate for politically and ideologically motivated activists, the leadership decided to go cyber and allocate resources accordingly. The cyber-campaign was a success because political reform was demanded by the citizens at the time and their cyber-campaigning combined potential participants' interests in cyberspace with a well-defined issue. More importantly, the campaign was a success because it successfully combined electronic advocacy techniques with more conventional advocacy techniques such as lobbying and street referendums.

#### 4) Coalition Building and Transaction Costs

(a) Inter-organizational Issues: Because CSOs tend to be small in size with an average of 7 full-time employees and income of less than 300 million Won, they tend to work more effectively when they form a coalition, especially in tackling dominant establishments such as the old political elite. But in order for a coalition to work effectively, it must manage communications and information structure. In other words, the transaction cost consideration was critical as a large number of CSOs were involved in the cause. This is

where the new technologies came into use. Because the marginal cost of information and communications systems under the new technologies is almost zero, the Alliance was able to coordinate its activities far more efficiently.

(b) Intra-organizational Issues: As with the inter-organizational transaction costs, the internal transaction costs within Alliance headquarters was kept at a manageable level with the aid of the e-mail-based techniques. According to internal CAGE documents, of the total budget of 506 million, only 5.5 million or slightly over 1% of the budget was spent on communications expenses. This is remarkable considering the Alliance consisted of 900 different CSOs, with more than 22 local monitoring teams and more than 1,000 volunteers taking part in the campaign. Thus, intra- and inter-organizational transaction costs were both brought under control with the aid of electronic-mail-based and web-based techniques.

## 5) Accountability and Governance

It is important to note that these ICTs enabled the Alliance to deal with public concern for accountability and governance by making its decision making process more transparent and more participatory. By utilizing e-mail-based technologies and promoting participation of netizens, the Alliance became the "legitimate" voice for the civil society. This was perhaps the first case where CSOs were able to tap into the resources of the citizens by enticing their

support, as proven by the high level of participation in the various discussion groups and the substantial number of financial pledges made.

## 6) Government Support

The growth pattern of Korean NGOs was different from that of other developed nations. In Korea, there appears to be more extensive government involvement in an attempt to 'induce' the growth of the NGO sector.<sup>9</sup> Although some argue that only the larger and well-funded CSOs have the means to engage in electronic advocacy, ironically the cost of electronic advocacy in the last election was partly offset by support given by the state. It appears that the Korean Council on Information Culture Movement (ICM) was also responsible for raising awareness among CSO activists in terms of the importance of the electronic advocacy.<sup>10</sup> This quasi-governmental organization is funded and supported by the MIC and they, in turn, provided various seed money for CSOs to utilize electronic advocacy techniques. Moreover, a more independent organization called the Civil Movement Information Center (CMIC) provided various technical and database-related support to CSOs.

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<sup>9</sup> The government assistance program is broad in scope, not only provided funding to social service organizations but also environmental and consumer groups, and even CSOs that supposedly monitor government ministries (Kim, 1999a). The total subsidies given to NGOs has had a four-fold increase from 84 billion Won in 1990 to 286 billion won in 1998 in nominal term and a two fold increase in real term.

<sup>10</sup> ICM was created in 1998 as a quasi-governmental organization with the aim of providing resources and technologies to 'information have-nots.' It has provided funds to over 33 organizations (40 projects) in 1998 and over 32 organizations (42 projects) in 1999. In the same year, it initiated a campaign to 'create a home-page for each CSO.'

With this institutional backing behind them, CSOs and their activists were able to accumulate important resources, in this case for the election campaign.

#### IV. Conclusions

The Korean elections have displayed that the concerted efforts of voluntary and civic organizations are making effective demands for political reform. There is no doubt that the citizens' electronic political crusade became a political landmark for Korea's participatory democracy by making citizens' participation meaningful in the political process. We found that new ICTs have transformed CSO advocacy strategies and practices in promoting political as well as social issues. These changes in technology-enabled public involvement will strengthen civil society and promote democracy overall.

We found that the CAGE's campaigning was successful for several reasons; First, it focused on matters that people cared about and targeted a specific issue; second, it effectively utilized both electronic-mail-based and web-based techniques in a country that has an excellent 'information super-highway'; third, the inter- and intra-organizational transaction costs of coordinating various types of organizations and individuals were brought under control by the use of new communications and information technologies; fourth, it was able to attract younger generations by relying on the Internet; and lastly, it utilized the traditional mass-media for its advocacy cause.

However, there are still some issues we need to confront in terms of the spread of electronic advocacy. First, some politicians, especially those named in the blacklists, questioned the validity of the movement and the criteria used by the civic groups to target individual politicians. Some were even suspicious about possible ties between the movement and the government. Second, a majority of the population, especially the old and the poor, has been largely oblivious to the information revolution.<sup>11</sup> While the gap between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' is showing signs of narrowing down, a skew toward the well-to-do and highly educated, and probably toward the more ideologically driven, seems inevitable.

As Corrado and Firestone (1996) mention, the success of new technology as a democratic tool depends on "the willingness of significant numbers of citizens to take advantage of these extraordinary new tools to engage in meaningful political discourse, become better informed voters, and get more involved in civic life." Although a group of individuals has opted to utilize the e-mail-based and the web-based technologies as new tools of the future, the majority who are less ideologically motivated and politically less interested are still dependent upon the traditional media. In addition, in terms of representation, it is not clear how the Internet users are politically different from nonusers. But evidence suggests that Internet users are significantly different from non-users.

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<sup>11</sup> The division is certainly related to education, gender, occupation and income: a survey shows a vast gap in regular Internet use between college graduates and high school graduates, men and women, white collar workers and blue collar workers, and those with income of \$20,000 and more and those at \$5000 or less (MIC, 2000).

Having successfully accumulated know-how gained during the election, civic groups are now leading a new wave of advocacy activities in cyberspace. This includes marketing to recruit new members (new marketing channels), leading opinions in cyberspace (new communication channels), and information sharing (new database and knowledge management channels). It is expected that online advocacy will gradually take over other traditional offline advocacy activities. In order to do so, they need to continue to be creative in their interaction with ordinary citizens, and to make the best use of available technology.

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