

Professors concerned about democracy in South Korea

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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 towards 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 state suppressed last year's 'candlelight vigils', 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 any 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, administrative organs that should be politically neutral, such as the Public Prosecutor's Office, the police, and the National Tax Service, 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 a regressing democracy and reorient itself as a government that respects the people's sovereignty and democratic rights. Democracy, the pride of Korea, must again find its direction and return to the natural path of serving the people.

List of 240 professors:

Jiyoung G. Hyowon Don Aldo Ban Baker Ahn Antonelli (California University) (New York State University of British Columbia) of California Long Beach Columbia)

Edward J. Baker (Harvard University)

Eun-Ok Baek (California State University, San Bernardino)

Tae-Ung Baik (University of British Columbia)

Wontae Cha (New York Theological Seminary)

John Chaffee (Binghamton University, State of New York)

Kyeong-Ok Chang (Kansas State University)

Daehwan Cho (Southern Arkansas University)

Dong-Ho Cho (Queens College City University of New York)

Hyunkag Cho (Michigan State University)

Junghoo Cho (University of California, Los Angeles)

Baek-Young Choi (University of Missouri, Kansas City)

Jinbong Choi (Texas State University, San Marcos)

Jong Choi (California State University, Bakersfield)

Kyeong-Hee Choi (University of Chicago)

Kyoung-Shin Choi (Purdue University)

Namkee G. Choi (University of Texas, Austin)

Woonsup Choi (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee)

Yoonsun Choi (University of Chicago)

Jennifer Jihye Chun (University of British Columbia)

Ock K. Chun (University of Connecticut)

Sung-Chang Chun (Mercy College of Northwest Ohio)

Nogin Chung (Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania)

WonJoon Chung (Carleton University)

Yoo Sun Chung (George Mason University)

Marc T. Cryer (University of Alabama, Birmingham)

Minsun Doh (Western Illinois University)

Alexis Dudden (University of Connecticut)

John B. Duncan (University of California, Los Angeles)

Henry Em (New York University)

Norma Field (University of Chicago)

Christina Ghanbarpour (Chapman University)

Jaesook Gho (Liberty University)

Laam Hae (York University)

Hyeouk Chris Hahn (Boston University)

Jungpil Hahn (Purdue University)

Seonok Ham (University of Kentucky, Lexington)

Dennis Hart (University of Pittsburgh)

Martin Hart-Landsberg (Lewis and Clark College)

Todd A. Henry (Colorado State University)

David L. Howell (Princeton University)

Theodore Hughes (Columbia University)

Chang Huh (Niagara University)

Jung Won Hur (Auburn University)

Merose Hwang (University of Toronto)

Wonjae Hwang (University of Tennessee)

Eunsook Hyun (University of Massachusetts, Boston)

David E. James (University of Southern California)

Roger L. Janelli (Indiana University, Bloomington)

Gyoung Sun Jang (Clark University)

Ivan Jeliakzov (University of California, Irvine)

Gyung-Ho Jeong (Claremont Graduate University)

Kelly Y. Jeong (University of California, Riverside)

Tae-Hee Jo (Buffalo State College, State University of New York)

Hee-Jung Serenity Joo (University of Manitoba)

Myungkook Joo (Rutgers University)

Boochun Jung (University of Hawaii, Manoa)

Changhoon Jung (Auburn University)

Kwanghee Jung (Rutgers, State University of New Jersey)

Taejin Jung (State University of New York, Oswego)

Wonho Jung (Washington Baptist University)

Woo Jung (California State University, Fullerton)

Jennifer Jung-Kim (University of California, Los Angeles)

Nick Kaldis (Binghamton University, State University of New York)
 Seung Ihl Kam (Louisiana State University)
 Heesam Kang (TUI University)
 Hugh H.W. Kang (University of Hawaii, Manoa)
 Hye-ryoung Kang (University of Nevada, Reno)
 Jinhee Kang (Virginia Commonwealth University)
 Namsoon Kang (Texas Christian University)
 Sinuk Kang (Westfield State College)
 George Katsiaficas (Wentworth Institute of Technology)
 Eyun-Jung Ki (University of Alabama)
 Byoung Sug Kim (Roosevelt University)
 Byungki Kim (University of Massachusetts, Lowell)
 ChangHwan Kim Kim (University of Kansas)
 Charles Kim (University of Wisconsin, Madison)
 Chigon Kim (Wright State University)
 Dae-Kyoo Kim (Oakland University)
 Daekyung Kim (Idaho State University)
 Duk Kim (St. Ambrose University)
 Dukhong Kim (Florida Atlantic University)
 Eleana Kim (University of Rochester)
 Hae-Young Kim Kim (Duke University)
 Heeman Kim (Kennesaw State University)
 HeeMin Kim (Florida State University)
 Henry Kim (Rancho Santiago Community College)
 Hoi-eun Kim (Texas A&M University)
 Hongkyung Kim (State University of New York, Stony Brook)
 Hwansoo Kim Kim (California State University, Los Angeles)
 Hyojoung Kim (Oklahoma State University)
 Hyunju Kim (University of Massachusetts, Lowell)
 Ilpyong J. Kim (University of Connecticut, Storrs)
 Janice C. H. Kim (York University)
 Jang Hyun Kim (University of Hawaii, Manoa)
 Jeong-Nam Kim Kim (Purdue University)
 Jeounghee Kim (Rutgers, State University of New Jersey)
 Jih-Un Kim (Webster University)
 Jina E. Kim (Smith College)
 Jinhee Kim (University of Maryland)
 Jon-Lark Kim (University of Louisville)
 Kyung Hyun Kim Kim (University of California, Irvine)
 Minjeong Kim (Colorado State University)
 MinJeong Kim (University of Massachusetts, Lowell)
 Nadia Y. Kim (Loyola Marymount University)
 Samuel S. Kim (Columbia University)
 Seong-Hee Kim (Western Michigan University)
 Sun-Chul Kim Kim (Columbia University)
 Sung-Kun Kim (Baylor University)
 Sungmoon Kim (University of Richmond)
 Sun-Young Kim Kim (Harvard University)
 Su Yun Kim (Hamilton College)
 Suzy Kim (Boston College)
 Tae-Hyung Kim (Daemen College)
 Thomas P. Kim (Scripps College)
 Wooksoo Kim (University at Buffalo, State University of New York)
 Yong-Lyun Kim (Empire State College, State University of New York)
 Young-Han Kim (University of California, San Diego)
 Youngjoo Kim Kim (Oakland University)
 Youngmi Kim (Jacksonville State University)
 Yung Soo Kim (University of Kentucky)
 Yunjeong Kim (Kansas State University)
 Mikyong Kim-Goh (California State University, Fullerton)
 Thomas R. Klassen (York University)

Hagen Koo (University of Hawaii, Manoa)
 Yong Ku (Johns Hopkins University)
 Tae Yang Kwak (Ramapo College of New Jersey)
 Kyong-Ah Kwon (Georgia State University)
 Nayoung Aimee Kwon (Duke University)
 Soonsik Kwon (Princeton University)
 Thomas Lamarre (McGill University)
 Bumsoo Lee (University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign)
 Cheol Lee (Wayne State University)
 Cheol-Sung Lee (University of Chicago)
 Dongwon Lee (Pennsylvania State University)
 Eunjung Lee (University of Toronto)
 Ha Youn Lee (University of Rochester)
 Hak-Seon Lee (James Madison University)
 Jin-kyung Lee (University of California, San Diego)
 Jinsun Lee (Old Dominion University)
 JongHwa Lee (Loyola Marymount University)
 Jung Lee (Richard Stockton College of New Jersey)
 Jungmin Lee (Florida International University)
 K. Samuel Lee (Claremont School of Theology)
 Kyoung H. Lee (University of Texas, Pan-American)
 Namhee Lee (University of California, Los Angeles)
 Sang-Hyop Lee (University of Hawaii, Manoa)
 Sangkwon Lee (Kent State University)
 Seoki Lee (Temple University)
 Seunghae Lee (Purdue University)
 Sunghee Lee (University of California, Los Angeles)
 WonSook Lee (University of Ottawa)
 Yeon-Shim Lee (San Francisco State University)
 Yeunjoo Lee (California State University, Bakersfield)
 Yoonkyung Lee (Binghamton University, State University of New York)
 Young-Jin Lee (University of Kansas)
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 Young-Jun Lee (Harvard University)
 Young-Sun Lee (Columbia University)
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 Ramsay Liem (Boston College)
 Chaeyoon Lim (University of Wisconsin, Madison)
 Churlzu Lim (University of North Carolina, Charlotte)
 Bokyoung Min (Nova Southeastern University)
 Pyong Gap Min (Queens College, City University of New York)
 Byongook Moon (University of Texas, San Antonio)
 Seungsook Moon (Vassar College)
 Seungahn Nah (University of Kentucky)
 Hwasook Nam (University of Washington)
 Seongwoo Nam (Ringling College of Art and Design)
 Siho Nam (University of North Florida)
 Taehyun Nam (Salisbury University)
 Yunju Nam (Washington University in Saint Louis)
 Youngrae Oh (University of Dayton)
 Ravi Palat (Binghamton University, State University of New York)
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 Cheolwoo Park (University of Georgia)
 Chiwook Park (Purdue University)
 Do-Hwan Park (University of Maryland, Baltimore County)
 Eugene Y. Park (University of California, Irvine)
 Hyunjoon Park (University of Pennsylvania)
 Hyun Ok Park (York University)
 Jong Chool Park (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute)
 Jong Hee Park (University of Chicago)
 Jungkun Park (Purdue University)
 Keun-Pyo Park (University of California, Riverside)

Nan Sook Park (University of Alabama)
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 Sung Bae Park (State University of New York, Stony Brook)
 Sung Kyun Park (University of Michigan)
 Sunyoung Park (University of Southern California)
 Won-ho Park (University of Florida)
 Youngrak Park (Columbus State University)
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 Dorothy DongHee Son (Texas A&M University)
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 ManSoo Yu (University of Missouri, Columbia)