

The Citizens' Alliance for the General Election (CAGE) 2000 Blacklists Corrupt Candidates A story from the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD)

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*'Let's Change Old Politics with Citizens'
Power'*

The most powerful slogan in the 16th parliamentary elections of South Korea in 2000 was *'Let's Change Old Politics with Citizens' Power'*. Indeed, the biggest winner of the first vote of the new century was the voter. A number of corrupt and incompetent politicians were defeated by a campaign led by the Citizens' Alliance for General Elections (12 January 2000-22 April 2000), a coalition of nearly 1,100 civic groups, thanks to the overwhelming support of citizens.

Background

In the 1990s, civic groups focused their election activities on voter participation and monitoring, believing that a fair election and citizens' participation would ensure wins by pro-democracy forces and political reform. But their hopes were crushed in the face of a stark, outdated political structure.

In past elections, both ruling and opposition parties mobilised huge amounts of illegal funds. Politicians had colluded to foil attempts to rewrite laws governing elections and political funding. Law enforcement authorities

had also lacked the determination to tackle political irregularities. Moreover, parties' nomination of candidates was far from democratic. Opaque nomination procedures often gave party candidacy to corrupt and incompetent figures. Parties put candidates' loyalty to the party leader over their ability to make laws and deliver campaign pledges. What mattered most to politicians was not voters' trust and judgment, but the confidence of their party leaders.

Citizens had grown disenchanted with politics. In such a political environment, voter participation and fair elections fell short of achieving a real electoral democracy. It was time for civic groups to go beyond the clean election movement. They needed to find innovative, relevant, even extreme ways to impact the political scene and show the full power of voters. Against this backdrop, the Citizen's Alliance for General Elections declared the start of the blacklist movement ahead of the 16th parliamentary elections to give citizens an opportunity to mete out justice to lawmakers.

Parliamentary inspection of the administration in 1999 became a direct reason for the establishment of the Citizens Alliance for the General Election 2000 Blacklists Corrupt Candidates. In 1999, 40 civil society organisations (CSOs) established a *'people's alliance to monitor the parliamentary inspection*

of the administration'. They formed different teams with specific areas of expertise to be able to do so.

They had planned to deploy their members to monitor 14 different committees of Parliament and choose the best and the worst Members of Parliament (MPs). However, nine out of 14 committees refused to have monitoring teams in their meetings saying that *'we cannot approve that civil society organisations rate members of the parliament'*, and two committees only allowed monitoring team in some of their meetings.

At the time, 95 percent of the people agreed to the necessity of people monitoring the parliamentary inspection of the administration. However, the National Assembly acted in a high-handed manner, and expressed its displeasure and explicitly refused the monitoring to take place.

By the end of the parliamentary inspection of the administration, it became obvious that the conflicts between political parties and civil society were about political rights rather than the ratings of individual MPs. The CSOs who had been involved with the monitoring therefore agreed to expand their monitoring efforts to the elections.

Main challenges

The blacklist movement hit several snags from the start. The biggest was institutional barriers. At the time, the Election Law banned any organisation – with the exception of those of party-

backed candidates and registered campaign workers – from election campaigning or activities to defeat particular candidates (Article 87 on the prohibition of social organisations' intervention in elections). In addition, both politicians and civic groups were banned from endorsing or opposing candidates before the campaign period began (Article 59 on the prohibition of premature campaigning). These provisions outlawed any civic campaign from opposing particular politicians and prohibited them from making any remarks during the periods of election and candidate nomination. To wage the blacklist movement, the alliance had to either pressure the legislature into amending the Election Law or disobey the law.

The civic groups declared that should the *'poisonous'* provisions remain unchanged before the elections, they would break the law in order to justly exercise their constitutional right to vote.

The declaration enraged politicians. Even before the alliance's official announcement, the media reported on the blacklist campaign, sparking anger among politicians. They called the move *'political terrorism'* and threatened to sue civic leaders for violating the Election Law. Their reaction backfired. Politicians' fierce resistance met with increasingly severe public criticism.

Public opinion overwhelmingly supported the blacklist movement as a vital and legitimate movement. Just ten days after the movement's proposal was issued, 412 organisations across the country

had signed up, meaning that almost all members of the clean election movement had joined the blacklist campaign. The alliance encompassed the nation's leading civic and religious organisations, including the People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD).

Main strategies and activities

The alliance's strategy could be summed up as a combination of a blacklist movement and political reform. The foremost goal was to weed out undesirable politicians through citizens' monitoring of party nominations and then active campaigning to defeat them in the elections. The alliance set a two-stage strategy. The first was executed during the nomination period from January to February. The group announced the first blacklist of politicians pressuring parties to avoid picking them as candidates. The second step was taken during the official campaign period between late March and 15 April. It unveiled a second blacklist targeting party nominees and campaigned intensively to have them defeated in the elections.

Another goal was to overhaul the political system that restricted voter participation and allowed the political establishment to monopolise elections. The two most urgent tasks were: to persuade the public of the legitimacy of the blacklist movement; and to push for the revision of electoral and political laws before the movement kicked off. The alliance decided to concentrate on the goal of getting the law revised in February and March. If it failed, the next step would be civil disobedience.

Fortunately, some clauses, including Act 87, were revised through a bipartisan agreement ahead of the parliamentary elections. The revision stipulated that social groups, with the exception of those receiving government subsidies, could carry out election campaigns during the campaign period. But only campaigns through news conferences, Internet pages and in-house newsletters for members were allowed. Printed materials, banners, street campaigns and assemblies were still banned. In other words, direct contact with voters and mass rallies were still outlawed, as well as electioneering before the official campaign period. After a long debate, the alliance chose a varied approach. It decided to use several means that were not seen as 'assemblies', such as telephone discussions with voters and one-man street rallies, while holding assemblies, even though these were illegal, shortly before the elections, for which alliance leaders were later fined.

The campaign plan

The alliance received proposals from participating organisations on how to decide on undesirable candidates. Each group would make sure that the criteria had enough voter support to affect the outcome of the elections and that they had convincing evidence. In the end, it was decided that decisive criteria to be blacklisted were: corrupt activities; violations of election law; anti-human rights activities and destruction of democracy and constitutional order; insincerity in law-making and activities against the (National) Assembly and electorate; positions on reform bills and

policies; suspicious behaviour or basic qualification for politicians; and failure to perform civic duties, such as military service and paying taxes.

Politicians would be blacklisted if their misdeeds were confirmed and classified under the criteria, even if they had been punished lightly or ruled not guilty in the past. The alliance decided to judge past wrongdoings retroactively in accordance with the latest political law provisions and civic groups' proposed revisions. To minimise controversy, the alliance sent politicians copies of materials unfavourable to them so that they could defend themselves. Legal advisers including lawyers supporting the campaign reviewed legal matters including libel.

The final list was reviewed by the 100 Voters Committee, a sort of jury consisting of civic group members, and approved by a meeting of representatives from participating organisations. Voters committees existed in 12 regional chapters and three religious groups, too. In making up the list, the alliance ruled out political considerations. Though it consisted of progressive groups, they agreed that the movement should not act as a judgment on political views.

The first blacklist was announced on 22 January and 22 February. It aimed to block party nomination of 102 figures. Of them, 44 failed to get candidacy, with some voluntarily withdrawing. The rest ran for election either as party nominees or independently. The second blacklist was announced on 3 April, ten days

before the elections, aiming to ensure the defeat of 86 candidates, including 22 independents.

Support from the public

The alliance carefully designed promotional programmes to gain greater public support. First, it conducted a survey on whether citizens approved of the blacklist campaign. In a poll just after the movement's launch, about 85 percent of respondents supported it. About 85 percent also said they would back the campaign even if it was illegal under the current Election Law.

Theoretical and legal legitimacy was also important. An advisory group of 150 professors in political science, sociology and law presented the theoretical basis for the movement. Its legal advisers and other lawyers' organisations filed a petition with the Constitutional Court against the Election Law provision that banned the blacklist drive, and provided counter-arguments against politicians' claims of libel.

It was not easy for the media to disclose the names because of fierce opposition from the politicians on the list. But under strong pressure from public opinion, not only liberal but also conservative newspapers and public broadcasters reported it. The alliance also formed a cyber-team to communicate with Internet users. Use of the Internet was already widespread and various online media outlets were popping up. The campaign garnered explosive support online, to which the movement's overall success was attributable. In late March, the

alliance began a cross-country bus tour and collected signatures to promote voter participation in the elections. Some 330,000 citizens signed up, promising to vote and consider the blacklist when casting their ballots.

On 3 April, the alliance unveiled the final list and launched a ten-day drive to defeat blacklisted candidates, especially zeroing in on 22 big-name politicians. The alliance used 'shadow candidate' tactics. For example, it dispatched a renowned human rights lawyer to head the campaign against a candidate allegedly involved in torture as a prosecutor. The effect of the symbolic contrast was as powerful as that of several mass campaign rallies.

Achievements and limitations

Of the 102 on the nomination blacklist, 44, either failed to win party nomination or gave up candidacy. Of the 86 on the second list, 59 lost elections, including a number of party big-wigs. The movement particularly targeted 22 influential politicians, of whom 15 were defeated. The results in Seoul and nearby areas were more dramatic with 19 of the 20 blacklisted losing elections.¹¹⁶ Fresh wind blew through Korean politics.

The success of the campaign stemmed from a combination of political events. Citizens' desire for political reform was as strong as ever, especially after the financial crisis of late 1997. Public distrust in political leaders' ability to deal with the crisis and anger about corruption by the privileged elite were ever fiercer. But politicians did not even understand

the seriousness of the situation, let alone carry out reforms. While ignoring a flood of corporate bankruptcies, mass unemployment and other simmering social problems, lawmakers abused their immunity to sabotage investigations into corruption in what was derisively called a '*brain-dead*' and '*bullet-proof*' National Assembly. The blacklist drive, though led by civic organisations, was in fact a citizens' resistance movement.

Another major factor in its success was the strength of the nation's civic movement that had built up since the June 1987 democratic uprising. Diverse civic groups concerned with the environment, women's rights, local communities, political reform and fighting corruption expanded rapidly through the 1990s and reached their peak in 2000. In addition, civic groups sought solidarity based on their shared experience of the pro-democracy movement under the dictatorship. It would have been impossible for more than 1,000 groups scattered across the country to agree on standards and form an alliance for the blacklist campaign without their shared history of hardships and pursuit of a common agenda.

The Internet also played a crucial role, providing new tools and forums for political communication. Restrictive measures in the Election Law were unable to gag the dynamic communication of the Internet. The aspiration for reform among the generation behind the pro-democracy movement and the younger Internet-savvy people sustained the blacklist movement and altered the form and content of Korean politics drastically.

However, the blacklist movement was not free from disputes, with complaints coming from both conservatives and progressives. Conservatives compared the movement to China's Communist Red Guards, accusing it of one-sided attacks and abusing the power of public opinion. Such criticism was raised mainly by the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) and spread by conservative media. Many members of the GNP were involved in corruption and military coups. Their argument was strengthened when the then liberal ruling party supported the blacklist campaign, judging that its candidates were not threatened by the movement.

But the movement never used political powers and the blacklist was designed only to help voters make an informed judgment. Moreover, its protagonists strived to exclude any political considerations and the result was not necessarily disadvantageous to the opposition party. In fact, GNP candidates won in most of the party's traditional strongholds. Progressives criticised the movement for focusing on individual politicians, rather than structural reform. They also claimed that the movement was so preoccupied with maintaining political neutrality that it neglected to do what was needed to help progressives advance in politics.

This argument was also less than convincing. The movement was an effort to pave the way for long-stalled political reform, and indeed added critical momentum to pull down the privileges of political conservatives

that had been embedded in the way parties, elections and political funding were run. Furthermore, in the wake of the movement, new progressive forces became much better placed to enter politics.

Conclusion

The movement rode on a wave of citizens' anger at crooked politics and created a crisis in the political establishment. Battered by the movement, politicians became painfully aware that they were far behind the times and could not survive without fundamental reforms. It dealt a serious blow to the structure of corruption and collusion among old parties and considerably weakened the influence of their corrupt bosses. Reforms of electoral, funding, parliamentary and party systems began in earnest.

The creation and disclosure of records of parliamentary activities was also enhanced and the screening of politicians' assets and the monitoring of their legislative activities became standard procedure. After the parliamentary elections, the National Assembly launched a special committee on political reform and began work to amend political laws.

The blacklist movement especially acted as a catalyst for substantial changes to party nomination procedures. For

¹¹⁶ Seung-nyong Lee, 'Morning After Blacklist Campaign', *Korea JoongAng Daily*, 16 April 2000

the presidential elections two years later, the ruling party chose its standard bearer through primaries in which both party members and general citizens voted. A one-person, two-vote system was introduced for general elections, allowing voters to cast ballots for their favoured party, as well as their preferred candidate. With the new system, parties and their policies were now judged by voters separately from candidates. The system allocated parliamentary seats in proportion to the votes each party won, in effect lowering the barrier for new parties to enter politics.

Most importantly, the campaign helped spur voters' voluntary and creative participation in politics. Voter participation advanced beyond the blacklist movement. Open nomination systems gave rise to a political supporters' movement. The new form of participation often triggered political storms that catapulted formerly marginalised politicians to the centre stage, as shown by the rise of the Roh Moo-hyun administration. The blacklist movement stirred a fresh and dynamic wind of change to Korea's electoral and political culture in the early 2000s.

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After the establishment of the Center of Peace and Disarmament of PSPD in 2003, he has organised various projects concerning disarmament and the democratic control of security powers. His efforts for peace and disarmament include, among others, a campaign against the War on Iraq and Afghanistan (2003), a campaign against the production of the Korean helicopter and a movement against the establishment of the naval base in Jeju Island, South Korea.