

Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK)

**URGENT APPEAL FOR PROTECTION OF DEMOCRACY,
HUMAN RIGHTS AND PEOPLE'S WELFARE IN SOUTH KOREA**

July 29, 2009

Dear friends and partners: Please read and respond to this appeal in prayerful solidarity.

The various sectors of South Korean society, as well as overseas political observers, have been witnessing how democracy has dramatically regressed to the 1987 state of affairs under the current Lee Myung-Bak presidency. This regression in democracy is characterized by the increasing incidence of violation of human rights and sheer neglect of the welfare of economically and politically vulnerable sectors such as industrial workers, urban dwellers, school teachers, those in the mass-media profession, truckers, courier-service workers, and citizens raising voices of dissent against government policies. President Lee Myung-Bak, since soon after taking office, has formulated and pushed for economic, political and cultural policies that stifle freedom of press and expression and violate human rights, in the interests of the elite class in society and the conglomerates in industrial, commercial and real-estate businesses.

The present government's conservative political stance is clearly revealed in its adherence to national security doctrine that increases police power to quell protest actions, breaks up labor-union strikes, reduces freedom of the press, and endangers people's job security. Political repression has been met by various sectors of society, including the Christian churches, with protest actions and prophetic statements urging the protection of people's rights and welfare, but these voices seem to be totally unheeded by the Lee Myung-Bak government. The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea (PROK) as a prophetic voice in society considers the unfolding situation to be very alarming.

Early this year, the Korean churches began to organize various protest actions including prayer gatherings, open forums, peace marches and prayer fasts, urging the Lee Myung-Bak government to preserve the democracy and protection of human rights achieved through the painful struggles of the people over the past decades. On January 22 and February 24 respectively, the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) and the PROK held memorial services for the victims of the Yongsan tragedy (see #1 below), urging the government to re-investigate the case and to heal the pain of the victims' families. On February 2, the PROK held a forum to evaluate the reunification policy of Lee Myung-Bak and demanded a

drastic change of the government's reunification policy. On June 16, some 1,221 PROK ministers issued an open letter to President Lee Myung-Bak urging him to listen to the pain-filled voices of the marginalized people who are crying for justice. On June 4, the PROK sent an urgent appeal to the United Nations Secretary General urging the UN to resolve the nuclear issue in North Korea through peaceful means and continue humanitarian support for North Koreans.

On July 13, about 200 PROK pastors and members gathered for a prayer meeting in front of the National Assembly to protest against the controversial proposal to amend the Press and Broadcasting Law being pushed for approval by the ruling party. On July 24, the National Clergy Conference for Justice and Peace started a prayer fast to show their anger against the newly amended Press and Broadcasting Law which was violently passed with no regard for democratic parliamentary procedure. The PROK Moderator, Rev. Seo Jae-II, has summoned all moderators of the 24 presbyteries of the PROK to an emergency meeting to be held on July 30 to analyze the critical situation in the country and to articulate the position of the PROK.

The PROK asks our partners and friends around the world to respond in solidarity to particularly the following five social issues:

1. Forced eviction of Yongsan residents

The rapid industrialization of South Korea has resulted in urbanization and redevelopment projects particularly in Seoul Metropolitan City. For more than two decades now, the government had been aggressively relocating residential areas to give way to high-rise apartment buildings, corporate offices, shopping malls, and other projects. Development aggression is a continuing experience of so many people, especially low-income Seoul City residents. In a contested redevelopment project in Yongsan District, central Seoul, low-income dwellers resisted the demolition of their homes, struggling hard to maintain their homes and livelihood in the area. But forceful police power was used to stop their opposition.

Six lives were lost at the height of the fierce struggle against Seoul City's Yongsan redevelopment plan on January 20, 2009; five protesting residents of Yongsan District and one policeman died. Early in the morning of this fateful day, an empty building in Yongsan, central Seoul, was occupied by some 50 protesters who had been forcibly thrown out of their dwellings under yet one more redevelopment project. Their purpose was to bring their desperate situation to the public's attention and to protest against the brutal urban redevelopment projects of the large companies favored by the government. But three and a half hours after their initial occupation of the building, the government deployed 1,600 policemen, riot teams and even police commandos and positioned four water-cannon vehicles around the building for a round-up arrest operation. Without negotiation and without mercy, treating the protesters as outlaws, the police began to violently disperse the protesters. In the course of the violent action by the police and the protesters' fierce resistance, fire suddenly blazed in the building. Nobody could

escape from the building surrounded by heavy police guard; the tragic result was six deaths and many injuries. Just nineteen days after the accident, the prosecution announced the result of its investigation, blaming the protesters for the tragic deaths; the prosecutor's office indicted 20 protesters for causing the fire and injuring police officers.

Soon after the prosecution's decision was released, many civilians, NGOs and religious groups, including the NCKK and the PROK, strongly urged the government to re-investigate the case, reveal the truth, and heal the pain of the victim families. But until now the government, headed by a Christian elder, President Lee Myung-Bak, has not responded to any of these demands.

The PROK grieves with the families of each of the six who died. However, we stand particularly with the families of the deceased Yongsan residents in their unimaginable pain. While the deceased policeman has been given recognition and honor, and his family compensated, the government has heaped only criticism on the deceased Yongsan residents and turned a deaf ear to the request of their families for a just investigation of the case and for recognition of the honor and dignity of their five loved ones who died. Until the government responds justly to their requests, the Yongsan families are refusing to hold funerals for their loved ones, and the bodies remain in the hospital mortuary. On July 20, six months after the tragic deaths, the Yongsan families and their supporters tried to bring the five bodies to the public square at Seoul City Hall to allow the public to pay their last respects and to remind the Lee Myung-Bak government that justice has not been granted to the five Yongsan protesters who died and their families.

2. The plight of Ssangyong automobile workers

The Lee Myung-Bak government's conflict-management skills have been tested since Lee took office last year. The first wave of protest actions by hundreds of thousands of people was against the approval of the US-Korea Free-Trade Agreement, which sent tremors through the halls of the presidential office and government agencies. These protests were followed by many more on various social issues that have plagued the Lee Myung-Bak administration.

The impact of the global recession on Korean society is unprecedented in the industrial, commercial, agricultural and service sectors of society. The national economy has registered negative digit and the export trade, particularly the automobile industry, has been severely affected. Ssangyong Motors Company, the smallest automaker in the country, is one of those seriously affected. The company, located in Pyeongtaek, Kyonggi Province, approximately 70 kilometers south of Seoul, went into bankruptcy protection in February this year with China's Shanghai Automotive Industry giving up management control of the company. Ssangyong Motors Company has been pushing a major restructuring program that included laying off 2,646 employees, or 36% of the workforce. Some 1,670 have taken voluntary retirement while the remaining workers numbering approximately 900 unionized workers are fighting the layoff.

With fierce determination, the striking unionized workers have occupied the Ssangyong automobile assembly plant since May 21, bringing production to a halt and causing output losses of 11,520 vehicles worth 245.6 billion won (\$196.4 million) as of June 25. They are demanding employment guarantees and reinstatement of the laid-off workers. Negotiations between the union and the management are at a standstill, the latter intent on not giving in to the demands of the union workers. The hard-line stance of the management has prolonged the occupation of the plant by the union workers, which in the last few days has turned violent because of the use of coercive police power.

On July 20 the management together with the Kyonggi Provincial Police Department attempted to enforce a court order, deploying the police to force the unionists to leave the plant so that the plant could resume operations. But management was unable to force them to leave because the striking union workers resisted. The following day, police tried to approach the paint shop where the unionists are gathered. Later that morning, the resilient union workers, remaining in the paint shop and preparing for any eventuality, suffered the spray of tear gas from a helicopter hovering above the place where they have camped. In retaliation, the unionists used giant sling-shots to fire stones at the police, and set tires ablaze to block the approach of the police.

On the same day the wife of a union leader committed suicide in her desperate grief over the loss of jobs of so many union workers.

Undeterred by the opposition of the union workers and anxious to resume the plant's operations, the company also sent some 1,500 executives to work for the second day in a row to conduct inspections of the plant and strategize how to overcome the union workers. No solution has been reached between the union workers and the management. The government failed to take a systematic approach to provide employment for the laid-off union workers. It is feared that the worst is yet to come and that violence will escalate due to the government's indifference to the plight of the union workers. The eruption of violence between the police and the union workers has not moved President Lee Myung-Bak to respond appropriately for the re-employment of or provision of alternative employment for the laid-off workers.

3. The controversial revision of the Press and Broadcasting Law

In spite of President Lee Myung-Bak's claim that he is taking the middle-way political stance rather than being biased toward the rich corporate magnates and conservative parties, he continues to push for enactment or revision of existing laws to favor the economic and political interests of the rich and other privileged people.

The controversy in the National Assembly over the proposed revision of the Press and Broadcasting Law was pushed to the limit when on July 22 the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) lawmakers forcibly entered the side door of the Assembly hall and voted in spite the physical resistance of the opposition Democratic Party (DP)

and the lack of quorum in the Assembly session. The proxy to the Speaker of the House used his convening power to call for a vote on the revised Press and Broadcasting Law which was unilaterally passed on a second vote.

The Press and Broadcasting Law revision passed on July 22 limits the amount conglomerates and newspapers, and cable channels that air news programs, can invest in the terrestrial broadcast industry to 10% and 30% respectively. The revision blocks conglomerates and newspapers from assuming management rights until the year 2012, and prohibits newspaper companies with readerships of over 20% from entering the broadcast market, which in the final analysis still qualifies South Korea's three largest conservative newspapers - the Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo and Dong-A Ilbo - to enter the broadcast market.

With the unilateral vote of the GNP lawmakers on the Press and Broadcasting Law, the most feared intention of the law is clearly shown: the oligarchic "ChoJoongDong" (Chosun Ilbo, JoongAng Ilbo, Dong-A Ilbo) will be allowed to monopolize not just the print media but also the television broadcasting industry. The revised Press and Broadcasting law will open the floodgates of conservative politics and will ensure the strong foothold of the ruling party in the broadcasting industry and therefore will control public opinion to the point of the loss of objectivity in broadcasting news about the state of affairs of the government. Freedom of speech and the press will be stifled.

On July 27, the chairperson of the Media Union, Mr. Choi Sang-Jae, was arrested for organizing various protest actions against the government, particularly against the Grand National Party (GNP) that pushed through the revised Press and Broadcasting Law.

4. Worsening North-South relations

There has been no sincere attempt on the part of President Lee Myung-Bak to resume dialogue and strengthen diplomatic relations with North Korea. In fact, since he assumed the presidency in 2008, bilateral relations with the North have been severed, aggravating distrust and animosity on the part of the North after the collapse of the Six-Party Talks. The political stance of the Lee Myung-Bak government in relation to North Korea, especially on the denuclearization issue, is met with resistance by the North in the form of launching long and short-range missiles. South Korea's humanitarian aid, such as food and fuel supplies, sits stranded at Incheon Port due to lack of political will of the government to deliver the promised aid to the North. The worsening relations between North and South have brought the tourism business in the Keumgang Mountains in the North to a halt and threaten the South Korean manufacturing businesses in Gaesong with closure.

The peace and reunification initiatives of the previous two administrations have been nullified. The attitude of the Lee Myung-Bak government towards the North has alienated the civil-liberty movements around the world that are involved in

peace and reunification programs in the North. The additional sanctions imposed by the UN on North Korea are driving the people of North Korea into further suffering and death. The reduction of food aid to North Korea from South Korea and the international agencies endangers the lives of millions of North Koreans.

5. Oppression of Korean Teachers' Union

The education policies of the Lee Myung-Bak administration have changed the political climate in the schools and universities. The Minister of Education, Science and Technology has to follow the conservative politics of the present administration even to the point of suppressing freedom of expression of school teachers, particularly members of the Korean Teachers Union (KTU).

On June 17 the Teachers Union made a public statement, signed by over 17,000 teachers, criticizing the education policies of the current government that promote severe competition and privatization of education, and suggesting improvements to the present educational system, particularly the admission, curricular and testing methods in public schools. They demanded that the government take measures to halt the relentless rise of private tuition fees, bridge income disparity among people, and withdraw the plan to establish independent private high schools.

The Department of Education, Science and Technology instructed its respective branches to dismiss 88 teachers who signed the first statement, alleging that those teachers violated the Civil Servants Law prohibiting them from participating in political activities.

In response to the harsh disciplinary action, the Teachers Union vehemently denounced the scheme of the Minister of Education, Science and Technology through a second statement, signed by 28,635 union members, on July 19. The statement declared that the mass punishment is an abuse of power and outright suppression of their right of expression. The Union demanded that the disciplinary action against their members be cancelled immediately.

PROK appeal for solidarity action

In this crisis situation the Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea appeals for your support for the protection of human rights, particularly of those who are most vulnerable, in the imperiled democracy in South Korea. We ask you to join us in our appeal that President Lee Myung-Bak restore civil liberties and protect the rights of workers who bear the brunt of the global economic recession.

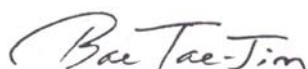
Your solidarity may be expressed through a petition letter to President Lee Myung-Bak and/or letters of support to the struggling people and groups mentioned above.

If you write to President Lee Myung-Bak, please send your letter directly to him at Cheongwadae, 1 Cheongwadae-ro, Jongno-ku, Seoul 110-820

(foreign@president.go.kr). The PROK will be grateful to receive a copy of your letter (at prok3000@chol.com).

If you wish to express your support to protesting groups, please send your letter(s) to the PROK, and we will translate and pass them on. We invite you to write a letter of support to any or all of the following: Yongsan Support Group; Ssangyong Auto Workers Union; National Clergy Conference for Justice and Peace; Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU).

We warmly thank you for your prayers and action for full justice for all.



Rev. Bae Tae-Jin
General Secretary
The Presbyterian Church in the Republic of Korea