



President Lee Jae Myung's Speech at the 2025 IPSA World Congress Seoul, South Korea - 13 July 2025

I sincerely welcome all of you to the Republic of Korea for the 2025 IPSA World Congress in Seoul.

I would also like to extend my heartfelt congratulations and gratitude to the relevant officials of the International Political Science Association for working hard to make this meaningful event possible.

At the 1997 IPSA World Congress in Seoul, former President Kim Young-sam said, "To resolve common conflicts faced by humanity, we must create a new communal order."

With democracy confronting a global crisis, we should ask ourselves, "Are we truly building a new order?"

In times of crisis, we must return to the basics. We will be able to make progress toward the future only by continuously asking how democracy needs to evolve to meet present demands and whether politics is laying the foundation for better lives.

The Republic of Korea rose from the ashes of war and the trials of a foreign exchange crisis to become the world's 10th-largest economy. On top of this, Korea stands as an exemplary democracy, having achieved democratization by overcoming heavy-handed dictatorial regimes.

However, as all of you vividly remember, something unimaginable occurred in the Republic of Korea on December 3 last year: The president mobilized the military to carry out a self-coup.

The December 3 self-coup astonished the world for two reasons.

First, it was appalling that the sitting president of the world's 10th-largest economy staged a self-coup. Second, it was remarkable that the armed military rebellion was defeated peacefully, without the shedding of a single drop of blood.

Shock and fear instantly gave way to awe and admiration.

Over the past six months – from last winter to this summer – the Republic of Korea has discovered hope amid despair and the possibility of progress in the midst of regression. Both the realities and challenges of global democracy lie embodied somewhere in this journey.

The December 3 insurrection has laid bare the fragility of democratic institutions.

The sitting president's preposterous military self-coup was driven by a desire to eliminate political opponents and cling to power permanently, rejecting dialogue and compromise.

This anti-democratic act of violence – seeking to eradicate people with different views – spiraled into unfounded distrust and violence against constitutional institutions. The fundamental liberal-democratic order that our citizens had protected with sweat and blood was ruthlessly trampled on.

Above all, the self-coup sowed seeds of conflict and division across society, leaving deep, lasting wounds.

Yet, like a flower that stubbornly seeks the light and blooms even under a shaded wall, the struggle to overcome the December 3 insurrection has revealed the genuine strength and hope of democracy.

As the world noted, the people of the Republic of Korea demonstrated unwavering courage and an unquenchable desire for democracy and freedom. They ultimately inspired hope for a brighter future.

Citizens encircling the National Assembly bravely confronted armored vehicles and weapons with nothing but their bare hands. They encouraged lawmakers to climb over the fence around the Assembly and vote to lift martial law.

Frontline soldiers, serving as citizens in uniform, defied unlawful orders and defended their dignity and honor.

The insurrectionist forces may have shattered the windows of the National Assembly building, but they could not put the slightest dent on our people's determination to protect democracy.

The great people of the Republic of Korea have embarked upon a magnificent "Revolution of Light" – countering the darkness of the insurrection and restoring everyday life.

For 123 days, it was touching to see the Revolution of Light bring to life the spirit of Article 1 of the Constitution of the Republic of Korea: "The Republic of Korea shall be a democratic republic" and "all state authority shall emanate from the people."

In addition, we were able to clearly witness that the true power that completes democracy lies not in the institutions themselves, but in the people's earnest engagement and aspiration to safeguard democracy.

The history of the Republic of Korea itself bears out this truth. At every critical juncture, when our constitutional order and democracy were trampled upon, the power and collective wisdom of our unified citizens helped lift democracy from the abyss and make it soar again.

The remarkable resilience shown by the Republic of Korea and the enduring strength of our democracy belong not just to Korea but also to the entire world.

I am confident that K-democracy, represented by our citizens' bright, colorful rallies, will stand as a beacon and a milestone for citizens of democracies across the globe who are searching for a way forward.

As the Korean people have shown, the only way to triumph over any threat to democracy is "with more democracy."

Now is the time to build bridges of coexistence, reconciliation and solidarity to overcome the inequality and polarization that deepen conflict and division; the political extremism that tears our society apart; and the isolation and alienation spawned by societies where everyone's sole concern is finding ways to survive on their own.

Now is the time to stress dialogue over conflict, healing over hurting, reconciliation over confrontation, cooperation over criticism and the principle of coexistence – attending to and caring for one another – over hatred.

The essential spirit of K-democracy will help safeguard the future and thoroughly restore the democratic values of freedom, equality and solidarity.

But the freedom I speak of does not merely mean freedom from interference or freedom from constraint, as some people say.

As we have witnessed through the military self-coup that destroyed our people's livelihoods, democracy and the economy are inextricably related.

In this era of crisis – when waves of inequality, polarization and poverty stand in the way of growth – freedom and the economy are one and the same.

Freedom is a warm meal that fills an empty stomach, a decent job that allows a person to build a life and a social safety net that can rescue people drowning in a quagmire of debt.

What freedom can exist in a home where family members have no time to spend together, at a worksite where laborers are forced to endure the scorching sun without any place to rest, in a society where place of residence determines life and death, and in a nation where a single failure closes the door on a second chance?

The sort of freedom that will serve as the driving force to protect our democracy is the freedom of being treated equally, which goes beyond freedom of choice; the freedom to debate on and participate in how one's community evolves; the freedom to continue pursuing dreams of a brighter future; the freedom to change one's circumstances through personal endeavors; and the freedom to stand on one's own as a member of society.

There is a common rhetorical question in Korea: "Does democracy put food on the table?" However, we must prove that democracy does indeed put food on the table.

We must continue to prove that democracy is the most reasonable and effective political system for helping us discover our hidden potential and inner possibilities and for building a nation brimming with hope, creativity and courage to take on challenges – a nation where everyone has a dream.

Only then can we keep anti-democratic forces – those hiding behind the mask of growth – from destroying our democracy by exploiting the cracks of inequality and poverty.

It will be difficult and arduous, yet one thing is clear: The great people of Korea have already shown us a better world that we can aim for.

In public squares characterized by freedom and equality, innumerable protesters holding “cheering sticks” of all different colors sang along in unison to cheerful K-pop songs, pushing back the tide of historical regression.

In those spaces where democracy was reborn in a brilliant light, people engaged in free discussion and together imagined a better world.

We flung open the doors to a new democratic republic by mustering the energy of solidarity, mutual benefit and consideration for others, which involves listening intently to others’ stories and showing mutual respect.

During the fight to end the insurrection, the people of the Republic of Korea wrote a new chapter in the history of democracy, and they did so by affirming the values of participation and solidarity. We saw this through the “Hershey’s Kisses protesters,” who wore survival blankets and braved the bitter cold by sharing their warmth; through the hot packs and heated buses donated in solidarity by those who could not participate in person; through the “advance payments” made so that protesters could eat for free in Yeouido and Hannam-dong, and which were given in the same spirit as the rice balls that fed the Gwangju crowds in 1980.

Now, we must move toward a forward-looking democracy where the collective intelligence of the sovereign people, which saved our troubled democracy, can be fully realized.

As deputies of the people, the president and other public officials must regain the belief that they are always reflecting the will of the sovereign citizens. These governing individuals must bring further innovation to democracy so that the capabilities of sophisticated collective intelligence can contribute to the advancement of a democratic republic.

We must reach a social consensus so that citizens’ diverse perspectives can be reflected more substantially, and deliberative democracy can be expanded to help solve difficult problems.

If we had not used the mobile phones we all carry to monitor abuses of power and ardently communicate with one another, the Republic of Korea might still be lost in the dark.

I believe that the AI revolution, which is already well underway, will help further develop digital democracy, thereby contributing to rational discourse and democratic decision-making and becoming a useful basis for strengthening direct democracy.

Some have voiced concerns about the negative impact of tech monopolies on democracy, but if these changes are inevitable, we had best act early and turn them into opportunities.

If we turn this crisis into an opportunity, the AI revolution will truly serve as a “singularity” that will open a bright new future for K-democracy.

We will be able to overcome the limitations of representative democracy, make up for the inefficiencies of direct democracy and build an innovative democracy that is required by the times.

This is the first step into uncharted territory and an arduous, new, untrod road. The analyses of the phenomena and alternatives for addressing the limitations inevitably remain diverse and unfamiliar.

As you all know, no democracy comes into existence unassisted. In the winding history of democracy, not a single day of spring has been enjoyed for free.

What led us back to the streets in the evenings last winter was Korea's history of ordinary grassroots movements and uprisings by resolute citizens – from the Donghak Revolution to the March First Independence Movement, the April 19 Revolution, the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement, the June 10 Democratic Struggle and the Candlelight Revolution – and the lucid, timeless memories etched in our hearts and minds.

The living answered the call of the dead; the spirits of the departed raised up living souls wrestling with despair.

As we willingly undertook the historical mission of brushing away difficulties and accepting challenges, we were able to add a new chapter to the history of democracy's advancement and leap forward into a new order that will help usher in a better world.

The Republic of Korea will audaciously step to the fore on the path to creating a new democratic order.

If anyone still doubts the power of democracy and the potential of popular sovereignty, I would like to tell them to look at the Republic of Korea in the East and watch the march of hope that Korea's democracy will lead.

The People-Centered Government, born from the Revolution of Light, is constantly engaging in experiments and innovations in direct democracy. These involve using the voices of the sovereign people as the guiding compass for running state affairs. Such efforts started with the Public Referral System, the Citizens' Suggestion Box and town hall meetings held nationwide.

In order to faithfully implement democracy's fundamental value and spirit – that “all state authority shall emanate from the people” – we will move toward “a nation that truly belongs to the people” by routinizing and institutionalizing direct communication with the people and actively reflecting people's voices in state affairs.

So, as to pass on to future generations the democracy of freedom, equality and solidarity, which is embedded in Koreans' DNA, we will move forward with greater strides.

I believe that the wisdom and opinions of the world-class scholars gathered here today will serve as a trusty stepping stone for creating and establishing a new democratic order. I congratulate you once more on the opening of the 2025 IPSA World Congress in Seoul.

Thank you.