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The Foreign Correspondents' Club of Japan

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FREEDOM OF PRESS STATEMENT ON THE PRESS ARBITRATION ACT AMENDMENT IN SOUTH KOREA (AUGUST 24, 2021)

FCCJ joins SFCC in expressing concern over move to amend media law

The Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan supports a statement by our colleagues in Seoul expressing concern over the South Korean government's move to pass an amendment to the Press Arbitration Act which they believe could seriously restrict the freedom of the press.

The SFCC statement follows:

The Board of Directors of the Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club (SFCC) expresses its deep concerns over the move to pass the amendment to the Press Arbitration Act at the National Assembly, which could seriously restrict the freedom of the press.

While the SFCC understands the need for a system to relieve the damage caused by fake news, we are concerned that this bill could result in a penny-wise and pound-foolish situation of undermining the basic rights of a democratic society.

In this regard, the SFCC Board of Directors supports the position of the Journalists Association of Korea and other local media organizations that 'society needs to create a balanced alternative in a calm manner that would strengthen a system to relieve damage inflicted by the media on citizens and would guarantee freedom and responsibility of the press'.

Besides the pending amendment to the Press Arbitration Act, some foreign media journalists based in South Korea have also had concerns about some aspects of South Korea's defamation laws, which have few parallels among major developed countries around the world. In South Korea, defamation can result in not only civil liability but also criminal punishment, and defamation can be established even if the facts described are true.

With the simultaneous achievement of democratization and industrialization, foreign media interest in South Korea has increased. The SFCC, which started with nine members 65 years ago, has grown to about 300 foreign correspondent members. Recently, an increasing number of foreign media outlets have moved their East Asian media hub to Seoul. Many of them noted the peaceful change of power through the candlelight protests, and the country's improved media environment and awareness.

The move to revise the Press Arbitration Act puts at risk the international image and free press environment that South Korea has built up over a long period of time, as it has demonstrated the fact that those in power could affect the newsgathering environment, for both domestic and foreign media.

The SFCC Board of Directors calls on the National Assembly to listen to the voices of various members of society with deliberation, as the Korean proverb says, "knock on a bridge before crossing it even if it is made of stone," rather than proceeding with the bill at the lightning speed.

Seoul Foreign Correspondents' Club Board of Directors

FCCJ Freedom of the Press Committee