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CHAPTER 7

**The Evolution of the Political Party  
System and  
The Future of Party Politics in the  
Republic of Korea**

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**Introduction**

Party politics in the Republic of Korea is in a state of dynamic evolution. Its future incarnations may be somewhat murky, and if the Republic has markedly advanced in instituting democratic processes, the past heritage of political parties within that context has been depressing and opaque. Present stresses are increasingly evident. Korean political parties have been the weakest link in the democratic process. How they will evolve will likely be distinctly Korean -- an amalgam of tradition and modernity with foreign models less relevant to the Korean scene than some Korean concepts of power and authority. The December 2002 presidential election and the preceding local elections of that year, together with the events leading up to them, have been important milestones in this process. The attempted impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun and the National Assembly elections of April 15, 2004, have exacerbated tendencies already evident. But these are milestones along a road through uncharted territory without maps. The process, whatever its destination, cannot help but affect the Korean-

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American alliance and relations between these two states, as well as South-North relations.

This period may be viewed as a transitional one – between a traditional system that has its most obvious derivation in the classic, often Confucian, concepts of and attitudes toward power and the role of the chief executive of the state, and that of a modernizing, pluralistic society with the freedom to express itself in ideological terms. This mix makes decision-making far more complex but certainly more democratic. To understand the present we need to first consider the past. In spite of seventeen elections to the National Assembly since the founding of the Republic, party politics in Korea may be considered a misnomer.

### **Party Politics: The Past as Prelude?**

Political parties in Korea by any comparative standard with the industrialized world did not exist.<sup>92</sup> Instead these amalgams have been entourages formed around significant, often charismatic, leaders. “Korean political culture is essentially personalized, regionalized, and anti-party... Korean political parties since national liberation were actually factions.”<sup>93</sup> In Max Weber’s term, Korea essentially was a patrimonial political system in which the leadership provided prebends (stipends) to followers

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<sup>92</sup> The use of the term “party” creates misconceptions in the West. The U.S. National Endowment for Democracy, through its Republican and Democratic Institutes, have as their goals the strengthening of the democratic processes through assistance in support of the political party process. Insofar as the assumption is that political parties are virtually the same everywhere because of the use of the term, the United States may be fostering the growth of undemocratic entourages, rather than parties that have any congruence with democratic governance. The model for such support may have been the Eastern European countries, which had quite a different tradition.

<sup>93</sup> Han Bae-Ho, *Korea’s Political Culture and Democracy (Hanguk Chongchi Munhwawa Minju Chongchi)* Seoul: Bobmunsa, 2003. I am indebted to Mr. Shin Myung of Georgetown University’s School of Foreign Service for research and the translations of these and other cited Korean language works.

who in turn supported the leader.<sup>94</sup> The focus on the leader has been an essential element of the party system. Although factions may strive for power within the party, a clear, emergent authority is required for even the ephemeral existence of a particular party structure.<sup>95</sup>

The system was fostered by an inchoate understanding that power was limited, not infinite, as is understood in modern administrative theory, and that sharing power meant its loss. Thus, the search for power was a zero-sum game. Power thus became highly personalized, where loyalty was not institutionally based, but personally garnered, leading in its most virulent form to intense factionalism.<sup>96</sup> Political parties were thus simply vehicles to obtain power or keep it. In a system characterized by a chief executive who had comparatively more power than American presidents, the party was a personal fiefdom, and many Koreans called the system the “imperial presidency,” no matter who occupied that office. In the pre-1987 period, the government party was not effectively separate from the executive branch, which dominated and controlled political events. A government party, then, did not contribute to societal pluralism.

In part because left-wing parties, which would have had overt political platforms and programs, were restricted and then essentially banned, right and center parties had no clear programmatic differences and were thus programmatically

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<sup>94</sup> For an often overlooked study of this phenomenon, see Norman Jacobs, *The Korean Road to Modernization and Development*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985.

<sup>95</sup> This phenomenon is not limited to particular parties, but is a general characteristic of institutions, including business ventures, in Korea.

<sup>96</sup> Many historians have regarded the erosion of power in the Yi (Chosun) Dynasty – 1398-1910 – as in part a result of intense factionalism among the *yangban* (gentry) class.

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indistinguishable.<sup>97</sup> This phenomenon began to evolve at one significant point – President Kim Dae-jung’s “sunshine policy” toward North Korea that was instituted following his election in 1997. This policy became the hallmark of the Kim Dae-jung administration and to which all other policies were, or seemed, subordinate - the defining policy of that government, and one that President Roh Moo-hyun has pledged to continue in some form.

Past opinion polls have indicated that the populace did not vote because of party loyalty, but rather because of the leader (and the leader’s place of origin). Party names changed to reflect the political *feng shui* (kr. *poong soo*), or geomancy; they were ephemeral, and often changed as the leadership shifted. There have been more than 100 political parties in Korea since 1948. Not only were parties transitory, but should there be other aspirants for party head or presidential candidate inside the party who were denied leadership, rather than work within the system they would normally form a new party to vie for power (e.g., Rhee In-jae in 1997). Parties did not train future leaders; their continuity depended on the existing leadership. A party existed to gain power for a leader and his (now also her) entourage or to hold onto such power.

The leader of the party (sometimes the incumbent president but most often under the president’s sway) wielded effective power through the very role that he played as chair. But he accumulated additional power through the proportional election

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<sup>97</sup> A Progressive Party was formed in 1956 in the Syngman Rhee period, but the party registration was cancelled in 1958 with the arrest of its leader. During the Chang Myon period (1960-61), there were short-lived leftist parties: the People’s Socialist Party and the Korea Socialist Party. After 1963, a United Socialist Party and a People’s Party existed, but never won an election and were politically neutralized by an authoritarian government. See Yoo Kwang-Jin, *Comparative Analysis of the Platforms and Policies of Korea’s Reformist Parties* (*Hanguk Hyukshinchungdang ui Chunggang, Chungchek Bikyoyonku*).

system, in which additional National Assembly seats were allocated to a party based on the percentage of the votes the party received.<sup>98</sup> There are now 46 seats available for proportional representation in the National Assembly. Because such aspirants for the seats wanted one that was “safe,” meaning one that was assured because of the anticipated percentage of the vote they expected the party to obtain, there were charges of corruption -- that candidates bought their high position toward the top of the hierarchical list. The truth of that assertion is unclear, but what may have been even more important was that this system reinforced the power of the leadership of the party because the loyalty of the candidate was not to any local constituency or program, both of which were irrelevant, but only to the party leader, thus further concentrating the latter’s authority. In the past, National Assembly candidates were not chosen by any decentralized popular process, but by the central leadership in a highly authoritarian manner. In the 2000 election, some 30 percent of the Millennium Democratic Party’s incumbents, and thus potential candidates, were replaced by the center.

Personalized power also leads to regionalism, where loyalties to leaders from certain areas (the Kyungsang provinces, the Cholla provinces, and the Chungchong provinces) were decisive forces in previous campaigns and still remain critical. “Korea’s politics have been highlighted by regionalism instead of contests over specific policies.”<sup>99</sup> This affected not only the voting in political

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<sup>98</sup> “The nationwide at-large seats are divided by allocating one seat to parties that have won no district seat but received at least three but no more than five percent of the vote. The remaining seats are then divided among the parties with at least five district seats, or with five percent or more of the vote, in proportion to each party’s share of the national vote.” Chan Wook Park, *Korea’s 16<sup>th</sup> National Assembly Elections*. New York: The Asia Society. April 2000, p. 10.

<sup>99</sup> Lee Jung Bock, ‘The Direction of Korea’s Political Development’ (Hanguk Chongchiui Baljun Banghyang), in Chun-gi Min, ed. *Politics of Korea in the Twenty-First Century. (21 Segi Hangukui Chongchi)*. Seoul: Bobmunsa, 2001.

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campaigns, but also the choice of higher-level administrative positions including those in the cabinet. Although the media and academic analyses stress the importance of these regional ties, which admittedly are critical and strongly influenced the results of presidential elections, whether regional voting bloc patterns are primarily a product of geographic loyalties or those of the leader who came from a certain area, or some arcane combination of both, is unclear. This phenomenon also affected the official entourage around various presidents. Presidents Park Chung-hee and Roh Tae-woo's most influential appointees were largely from the North Kyungsang Province and centered around Taegu, while those of Kim Dae-jung were from the Cholla provinces.<sup>100</sup>

This system was reinforced by the traditional political trait of loyalty, which has led to orthodoxy. As power was personalized, so was loyalty; one was loyal to a particular president, not to the presidency.<sup>101</sup> Thus, the concept of a "loyal opposition" was an oxymoron, for if loyalty were personal, rather than to ideals or institutions, then being in opposition was disloyal to the leader by definition. Orthodoxy has been a salient characteristic of political life. The Korean papers have been full of characterizations of opponents of parties or factions as "impure" or "ideologically polluted," indicating that the only correct path was that trodden by the leader. The leader operated (and/or was treated) in a Confucian manner as the "father" whose views were always *ex cathedra*. Deviation from the political norm would lead to ouster or resignation from the party. When once it was suggested a few years ago that a non-partisan public record should be published on how each National Assembly member

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<sup>100</sup> Anecdotal evidence is that during the Kim Dae-jung era, those with Cholla origins were sought for appointment or advancement, not necessarily directly by the Blue House, but throughout the bureaucracy. The closest ties are those formed at secondary school level, rather than at university, which reinforces regionalism.

<sup>101</sup> It is not surprising that Park Chung-hee placed great stress on loyalty.

voted so that voters could be guided by their views in choosing among candidates (along the lines of that distributed by the American League of Women Voters), this was considered unnecessary because almost all votes were essentially along rigid party lines. There have been basically few free votes -- a fact that increases the pressures on the part of all parties to ensure an absolute majority in the National Assembly.<sup>102</sup> One is reminded of the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta, the *H.M.S. Pinafore*, in which the “ruler of the queen’s navy” sings that he was elected to a pocket borough in Parliament, and that he “always voted at his party’s call,” and “never thought of thinking of himself at all. I thought so little they rewarded me by making me the ruler of the queen’s navy.”

This entourage syndrome has resulted in the National Assembly politics and debates that have been characterized as exceptionally confrontational, often invoking physical violence or subterfuges, such as excluding the opposition parties from attending voting sessions by force or stealth. No matter what the issue and what party, if one party supports policy “A,” the opposition party will support policy “non-A” or policy “Z.” Since parties have had no intellectual platforms, the only consistency has been the consistency of opposition.

A continuing aspect of the National Assembly in the ROK (and that of the Diet in Japan) has been the inordinate weight allocated to rural areas, which has in the past led to heavy subsidies for the rural sector, and vigorous protests against the importation of agricultural products, such as rice and beef. In a July 2004 poll conducted under the auspices of the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 78 percent of Koreans believed the rice market ought to be protected. In the past, the rural sector has generally been more conservative than urban areas. A National Assembly

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<sup>102</sup> The first time that a president’s party lost a majority was in the 1988 elections, significantly after the 1987 political liberalization.

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legislator represents between 75,000 and 300,000 voters.

Another characteristic of the parties and the National Assembly has been the extremely small percentage of women elected in spite of non-governmental organizational efforts to encourage and train women to run for public office. The average percentage of women elected is about two percent, but more women are appointed through the proportional representation system, and at various periods as parties promise the voters that they will increase women's representation.

A continuing element of the political party scene has been the question of campaign financing. Since the Syngman Rhee period, it has been an issue involving corruption on a massive scale. Although strict election campaign regulations exist, and the official time allocated for the campaign is about three weeks, there are continuous charges that very large sums are spent in buying temporary allegiances, which might be expected from a patron-client relationship, and thus a pattern that runs deeper than simple corruption.<sup>103</sup> The financing aspects of the party process have never been transparent. For the parties to assume positions of trust in the society, transparent requirements and regulations on fund-raising, donations, and uses of such monies are essential if cynical attitudes toward parties are to be overcome. Part of this process must be the attenuation of the close link between government and the business sector, which has traditionally been extremely close since Park Chung-hee in 1961 nationalized all institutional credit and started the export drive that brought so much success to the country. The IMF and other institutions called for severing the close links between the business sector, banking, and the state, a link that caused much of the 1997 crisis in financial institutions. However, President Kim Dae-jung still had Hyundai, through Korean banks, transfer some US\$500 million to Pyongyang in relation to the summit of 2000. This is

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<sup>103</sup> Two former presidents were indicted and convicted of corruption.



an indication both of the strength of the presidency and the continued relationship between the state, the banking system, and the private sector.

### **The 2002 Presidential Campaign, Its Aftermath and Political Realignment in ROK**

The presidential campaign of 2002 started out as predictably as might be imagined, but it defied all expectations. This was true not only in the results, which were surprising in themselves, but in many other elements of both process and content, including issues related to the parties. Demographic changes were critical with splits along age groups – even though Korea is aging, youth predominates and their perceptions are often quite different from their elders.<sup>104</sup> This seems the first time the demographic split was so obvious or important, although it had been noted as becoming increasingly significant. The campaign had a policy content, which was new for a major party (Kim Dae-jung's "sunshine policy" was instituted after he was elected), which for the first time focused in part on the negative role of the United States, troop presence and corresponding problems, the Status of Forces Agreement, and peninsular relations.

There was also a change in elite status in the society, with the intellectuals associated with a variety of previous governments losing their preferred administrative or consultative positions. There was for the first time the semblance of a process of the popular choice of candidates through a truncated "primary" system.<sup>105</sup> Television and the Internet played a far more

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<sup>104</sup> In the April 2004 National Assembly campaign, the chair of the Uri Party suggested that the elderly should not bother to vote because youth would control the results. This statement so incensed the Korean public that he was forced to resign.

<sup>105</sup> The Millennium Democratic Party conducted 16 primaries from March 9 to April 27, 2002, while the Grand National Party followed suite with 12 primaries from April 13 to May 9, 2002. Only a relatively small number of

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important role than did the mass rallies of previous campaigns. There was even a television debate between Mr. Roh Moo-hyun and Mr. Chung Mong-joon, in which the former won, and the latter bowed out of contention for the post. That leadership came together for a period, although it split on the eve of the election. Although regionalism was expected to diminish significantly with the political passage of the era of the “three Kims” (Mr. Kim Young-sam, Mr. Kim Jong-pil, and Mr. Kim Dae-jung), this may have been a simplistic expectation. It still remained a potent element of the campaign. That it changed even in part was significant. Civil society continued to play an important role. Labor fared poorly once again.

In February-March 2002, of the thirteen presidential candidates discussed in the Korean media, 70 percent were from Seoul National University.<sup>106</sup> This seemed to presage a continuity of the elite group, which turned out to be incorrect. Mr. Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party, with a majority of 150 seats in the then 272 seat National Assembly, seemed assured of victory, also having won the local elections on June 13, 2002, in which his party elected 11 of the 16 governors and mayors (the Millennium Democratic Party of Mr. Kim Dae-jung got four, all in the Cholla provinces – his base of support). The victory of the conservative 67-year old former Supreme Court judge Mr. Lee seemed so assured that on his visit to Washington in January 2002, he was treated in an unprecedented manner for a candidate – he saw high-level U.S. officials such as Vice President Cheney, thus tipping the U.S. preferences for a person of known quantity,

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party loyalists were allowed to participate in each, and there are questions whether those chosen demographically represented the voting public. Yet it was a milestone in Korean politics. See Jung Dae-Hwa, *Korea's Politics in the Post-Kim Era (Post Yangkimsidae ei Hanguk Chongchi)* Seoul: Kaemagowon, 2002. Chapter 4, “Political Party Reform and the National Primaries.”

<sup>106</sup> Even the leader of the Democratic Labor Party was a Seoul National University graduate.

who lived through the Japanese occupation and the Korean War and have an ingrained gratitude towards the Americans, whom he considered to be saviors, and who would likely take a more conservative approach to North Korea, more in line with the Bush administration predilections.

What was little noticed in the local elections, however, was the surprise showing of the Democratic Labor Party. It fielded 211 local candidates, capturing two heads of local government, 11 council members of major cities and provinces, and 32 council members of local governments. It received 8.13 percent of the total vote, virtually throughout the whole country, and became the third party in the country in terms of popularity.<sup>107</sup>

The unexpected presidential election victory of Mr. Roh Moo-hyun has shifted power to a new elite group, one far more insular than those of the past, younger, and more independent of the United States. President Roh has surrounded himself with a group virtually unknown internationally (with a few exceptions) and they do not seem to have longer-term, close ties to the president. The Millennium Democratic Party disintegrated after President Kim Dae-jung's term ended, many joining the Uri Party representing the new political elite. The "reformist" segments of it, who are the loyal supports of the president, have moved toward the left (more accommodating to North Korea) even as President Roh as a pragmatist has moved toward the center, and has attempted to improve his relations with the United States. This has important implications for the future, because such a repositioning may alienate the youth, which have been most critical of the United States and have been the basis of his support and election. The question remains whether or not President Roh will be able to keep his party together throughout

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<sup>107</sup> Cho Hyun-Yon, "June 13 Local Elections and the Outlook of the 16<sup>th</sup> Presidential Election: Democratic Labor Party Perspective," *Political Criticism (Chongchi Bipyong)*. 2 (2002): 29-60.

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his five-year term and hold his core supporters.

The ferment in the party process deepened after President Roh's election victory and inauguration. The formation of the Uri (literally, "We") Party witnessed the virtual destruction of President Kim's Millennium Democratic Party, but it was composed of diverse elements – one group loyal to President Roh and a more pragmatic middle-of-the-road group. The former group consisted mostly of the past dissidents in the authoritarian period, who were convinced that North Korea posed no real threat to the South. The Grand National Party at that time still had a majority in the National Assembly, and in a 193-2 vote (all Uri party assembly men walked out) they were able to pass legislation on March 12, 2004, impeaching President Roh on what seemed to be minor charges of impropriety involving parliamentary campaign law. To take effect, however, the impeachment had to be approved by the Constitutional Court (effectively the supreme court on such constitutional matters). After deliberation, the Court rejected the parliamentary charges on May 14, 2004, thus restoring the full presidential powers to Mr. Roh Moo-hyun and strengthening the Blue House. Importantly, the impeachment trial created a backlash among the electorate, with the Uri Party gaining a small majority in the April 15, 2004 national parliamentary elections as a result.

An important change became evident as a result of the 2004 National Assembly elections. This was the rise of a clear left-wing alternative to the conservative parties. This was a result, perhaps inadvertent, of the opening of the democratic process, as Korea became a member of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -- the political freeing of labor and labor unions. In the 1997 presidential election, some thought that labor did quite poorly in its political debut because Mr. Kim Dae-jung had the labor vote sewn up. If the results of the Roh presidential election were indecisive in this regard, it was not so in the 2004 National Assembly elections. By 2000, labor had not

yet developed into a central and potent political force, and it seemed unlikely it would do so for some time unless there were a very severe downturn in the economy and a significant rise in unemployment.

The Democratic Labor Party, which had only been formed two years earlier, presaged its strength in the 2004 National Assembly election by its showing in the 2002 local elections. It could, however, become pivotal in National Assembly legislation. Changes in the voting regulations, which allowed voters to choose both a candidate and a party separately, changed the equation in 2004. The Democratic Labor Party, which had never elected a national representative, was able to do so and, with proportional representation, ended up with ten National Assembly seats. Equally important, the DLP received about 13 percent of the total vote nationwide. This is a significant shift, because with the very slim majority that the Uri Party holds (although the usual pattern has been for both members and candidates to switch parties to reap the rewards of office), the Uri Party may well need Democratic Labor Party support, which it is most likely to receive on votes that involve social issues or those that relate to perceptions of the U.S. hegemony on the peninsula. Growing income disparities between the wealthy and the poor may give that party increased salience in the society, although most people, it seems, continue to consider themselves to be middle class.

### **The Roh Administration's Domestic Reform Agenda**

President Roh and his party have begun a series of campaigns that seem determined to accomplish purges of the influence of the old elite, although he might term such actions to be attempts to build a new Korea. In his August 15, 2004 National Day speech, he discussed at length the need to make public the sad heritage of the country and those who had collaborated with the Japanese colonial rule, since this had never been done, and many

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who had been intimately involved with the Japanese colonial authorities were given or achieved important positions in the independence period.<sup>108</sup> The obvious target was Park Chung-hee, who had been in the Japanese military as an officer and whose daughter, Park Geun-hye, had assumed the leadership of the Grand National Party. She was the person who, because of her Kyongsang province connections, saved the GNP from an even more ignominious defeat than it received in the 2004 National Assembly elections. The opposition countered that any such “truth-finding commission” should include the investigation of those families that had collaborated with North Korea or who had communist sympathies. Turmoil persists as the issue is debated, but the first casualty was the leader of the Uri Party himself, Mr. Shin Gi-nam, who had lied (or had not known) about his father’s involvement with the notorious Japanese police, and who had to resign from his party leadership post.

The second program that President Roh plans to initiate before his term expires, although it will take much longer to accomplish, is the movement of the administrative capital from Seoul to Chungchong Province near the provincial city of Kongju. Although some ten or more years ago a part of the administration of the executive branch had already moved south to Kwachon, about twenty miles south of Seoul, the latest move has been designed to balance regional development and mitigate the excessive concentration of wealth in the capital and surrounding province of Kyonggi. This may not only be an attempt to decentralize national administration and provincial wealth, but also affect income distribution more generally. This has caused great consternation, because wealth in Korea is largely concentrated in real estate, and such a move would severely

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<sup>108</sup> North Korea had purged all families of collaborators with the Japanese, and in part Kim Il Sung’s legitimacy was based on that fact, while in South Korea the American military government (1945-48) employed many who had worked for and with the Japanese. How much President Roh’s stress was based on this example is unclear.

damage the assets of many in Seoul. Some years ago, the World Bank noted that income distribution in Korea (which has worsened since the 1997 financial crisis) was not too skewed, but wealth, which was extensively concentrated in real estate, was heavily weighted. Mr. Roh's capital relocation plan has been widely discussed in the media and in the National Assembly, and some have called for a national plebiscite on this issue.

Such a movement would have severe repercussions, not the least because the bureaucratic elite want to send their children to the best schools in Seoul and, at least for some considerable period, families might have to be split to ensure that the children have the best chance to enter a good college by sending them to the best secondary schools. There has also been some serious discussion about moving Seoul National University, the premier university in the country, south to the Kongju area. This clearly is motivated by an attempt to break up the intellectual elite that have dominated Korea for several decades. But, on October 21, 2004, the ROK Constitutional Court ruled that Mr. Roh Moo-hyun's capital relocation plan was unconstitutional, and the Blue House, despite its considerable displeasure, decided to accept the verdict, without any serious political fight.<sup>109</sup>

Another significant element of the heated national debate is the question of revoking or revising the National Security Law, a law that in some form or other has existed since independence in 1948. First considered as an anti-espionage law, its provisions are so broad that one may be arrested for any contact (including reading unauthorized material) or advocating the position of an anti-state entity, which of course has meant North Korea. It also includes provisions for arresting those who criticize the South Korean social and political system. The law is now intermittently invoked but can be used by any regime against

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<sup>109</sup> See Andrew Salmon, Korea Court Rejects Plan for Capital Relocation, "International Herald Tribune," October 22, 2004.

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dissidents. President Kim Dae-jung tried to change it, without effect, and President Roh is committed to eliminating it and substituting anti-espionage legislation in the criminal code, but the opposition GNP wants it retained with modifications. Since North Korea has long insisted on its elimination, that has become an additional issue that has pitted the liberals against the conservatives inside the ROK political establishment.<sup>110</sup>

A seeming reaction against those influential intellectuals and officials who have had strong ties to the United States, mostly through graduate education, is a rise in those politicians who were well educated internally. This Korean-educated elite has assumed many positions of influence, reflecting a changed mood in the society and the rise of a quiet anti-American sentiment that is not dependent on some unfortunate, but newsworthy, incident usually involving American soldiers.<sup>111</sup>

The traces of a political campaign aimed against the influence of the so-called old conservative elites can be found also in the Roh administration's efforts to break up the iron grip of the three powerful conservative central dailies – the "Chosun Daily," the "Joongang Daily," and the "Dong-Ah Daily" -- on the printed news media market, as well as in the plans of the Ministry of Education to increase its influence on the admission procedures and curriculum formulation policies of several large private universities in Korea. But, it still remains to be seen whether the ruling Open Uri party will be able to push the corresponding reform legislation through the National Assembly against vociferous opposition from the GNP.

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<sup>110</sup> One of the ironies of the legislation is that by calling for its elimination (i.e., agreeing with the North Korean line) one could be subject to its provisions. For many years the United States refused to sign an extradition treaty with Korea because the U.S. had no similar legislation.

<sup>111</sup> For a study of anti-American sentiment, see David I. Steinberg, ed. *Korean Attitudes Toward the United States: Changing Dynamics*. Armonk, N.Y.: Me. E. Sharpe, 2004.



## **Foreign Policy Challenges Facing President Roh Moo-hyun**

How best to deal with the United States has become an immediate issue involving the political parties and is intimately intertwined with how to deal with North Korea. Important as well has been the increasingly larger role of China in that process and in Korean affairs. President Roh wishes to separate the political relationships with the North from humanitarian and economic assistance, and is forging ahead with the Kaesong Industrial Park in the North and with a continuing relationship that, with all the permutations of negotiations, has had some modest progress, including for the first time military-to-military discussions to mitigate points of tension.

Although both the Koreans and Americans officially do not admit it, relations with the United States have deteriorated to an unprecedented degree. President Roh has said that the alliance with the United States is vital, and he has moved to the center. In doing so, he has gone against Korean public opinion in general and members of his own party in particular by sending some 3,000 Korean combat troops to Iraq along with almost 700 non-combatants. Although he may have felt that this gesture would mollify Washington and thus the Bush administration would take a softer line toward the North, he was warned in advance that this would not happen. South Korean national interests are first, quite naturally, focused on the peninsula, while those of the United States, equally naturally, are global. Dealing with the North and the differences in approaches, especially under the first G.W. Bush administration have heightened differences in relations and resulted in strains in the alliance.

The movement of one-third (12,500) U.S. troops out of Korea and the evacuation of the Yongsan Garrison and 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division south of the Han River have created some consternation in official and private South Korean circles, where the feeling is

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that “America may abandon Korea.” Although the majority of South Koreans, according to most polls, believe that U.S. forces should remain in the country for an interim period. But, the prospect of their possible withdrawal creates conflicting sentiments – of both elation (especially among the younger population) because of the expected increased autonomy of the Republic that has been in the U.S. shadow for decades, and anxieties based on a long period of dependency on the U.S. military umbrella on the part of older members of the society. Neither Korean nor American side has dealt with its own population by explaining the nature and importance of the relationship to the national interests of each state with the candor that is required of a democracy if public policies are to be supported. The Uri Party generally wants to take a more independent line from that of the U.S., while the opposition is more concerned about the strength of the alliance.

Although both the U.S. and Korean Presidents have said they will not tolerate North Korea as a nuclear power, those statements may become less meaningful over time. The positive trend in the ROK that the government Uri party is fractured with its president indicates that the monolithic executive-legislative nexus in the Seoul administration is breaking down, illustrating over the longer term (however difficult the short run may be) that the party politics is becoming more autonomous – a beneficial change for consolidating democracy. The development of bipartisanship in dealing with the United States and North Korea is important but seems illusionary. Without such a policy, anti-American sentiment is likely to grow.

The role of China has become pivotal. China is now South Korea’s largest trading partner and the focus of the largest South Korean direct foreign investment. China, in recent polls, has become the country that Koreans regard as potentially the Republic’s greatest friend over the next few years, replacing the United States, which has held that position since polling started.

The Chinese have been the broker in dealing with international negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea and have hosted the Six-Party Talks on nuclear issues related to the North. This euphoria with China is demonstrated by the study of Chinese among Koreans, which has become a major fad (the number of high schools teaching Chinese has almost doubled from 2002 to 2004).

The recent infatuation with China has been somewhat dampened by the claim by some Chinese research institutions that the kingdom of Koguryo (until 668 A.D.) was not of the fabled Korean Three Kingdoms, but rather a Chinese state.<sup>112</sup> The South Koreans have vigorously expressed their outrage at this concept. On a more contemporary note, the Chinese have become concerned that the inflow of migrants, some 200,000 - 300,000, for either political or economic reasons into Manchuria from North Korea,<sup>113</sup> could cause instability in the Korean Yanbien Autonomous Region adjacent to North Korea and populated by some two million ethnic Koreans. The October 2004 passage by the U.S. Congress of the North Korean Human Rights Act is likely to exacerbate problems with the DPRK, and between the Republic and the United States, as well.

### **Conclusion: Party-Building Process Outlook**

The most salient feature of the changes in the political party process has been the further institutionalization and deepening of the democratic process. The ferment that has occurred over the past several years has been traumatic for some Koreans, but it

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<sup>112</sup> There is no doubt that the Chinese during the Han Dynasty established a military colony in what is now Korea, but the recent claim to Koguryo as Chinese may be an effort to ensure that in any breakdown of the North Korean regime parts of Manchuria, now occupied by ethnic Koreans with Chinese citizenship, do not spin out of Chinese control.

<sup>113</sup> The Chinese refuse to call them refugees because this might trigger UN involvement with them.

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has indicated an acceptance and solidification of democratic governance. There is also an indication that over time the process of political decentralization through the development of real local constituencies and a more active local administration will further affect political pluralism and diminish the pervious and almost unquestioned authority of the president and/or party leader. Local autonomy means that the power of the center will be eroded over time by democratization on the periphery. Although the center will still continue strongly to influence party candidate choices, with the build up of local constituencies there will be greater mobility within the system, and one can expect that eventually a more participatory process will emerge. The next local elections are not scheduled until 2006.

Regionalism, while perhaps not as virulent as it was under the “three Kims” period, is likely to continue to be significant. President Roh’s strengths in the Cholla provinces will likely continue to affect elections in that area, securing a base for the Uri Party. How much that sense of opposition to the establishment has been ingrained in that region since the 1960s and therefore might endure if the next president came from another region is questionable.

Civil society will continue to be a rein on political malpractice. Their influence remains profound, not only as a critical element of the democratic process providing pluralism in the power structure, but also as a brake on a reversion to the corrupt political practices of an earlier era. In 2000, the Citizens’ Coalition for Economic Justice and the coalition of over 400 civil society groups designated 113 people as unfit or unqualified to run for the National Assembly because of past crimes or activities, and about two-thirds of them failed to obtain seats in the Assembly. That practice, itself of questionable legality, was repeated to a lesser degree in the 2004 National Assembly elections. It is, however, important to remember that even civil society groups often exhibit the same traits of strong, even authoritarian, leadership, as do political parties. They have

developed a reputation as being highly nationalistic.

The changing patterns in the media and how people get their political news are important, too. The importance of the old press and television is likely to continue, but the new Internet-based news and communications will probably alter the exposure of youth to information. Any political party in Korea will ignore that avenue at its peril. President Roh had been opposed by the three "clan owned" newspapers, the "Chosun Ilbo," "Dong-A Ilbo," and "Joongang Ilbo," and his antipathy to this element of the media has been extensively reported. His restrictions on governmental contact with the media have been vigorously protested by the opposition political party. Influence on or control of the media is one element of a tendency for orthodoxy. A critical element in his election was the Internet, which supplied alternative, non-establishment news and views, and especially influenced the youth. The Internet is likely to continue to play a critical role in future elections.<sup>114</sup>

Perhaps the most important change that is slowly emerging is also the subtlest. That is, the tension that has become evident between the traditional pattern of Korean political parties of an entourage system of patron-client relationships, and one that is more ideologically based. There are important liberal tendencies among a significant number of members of the Uri Party; and the Democratic Labor Party is committed to an ideological position. Because of the liberalization of the political climate, we are likely to see the growth of ideologically-based political positions that will conflict with or perhaps supplement the more traditional entourage politics of South Korea. The next test will be in the local elections of 2006.

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<sup>114</sup> Ohmy News, which supported the election of Roh Moo-hyun, is actually composed of some 30,000 self-appointed correspondents who send material to the center, where it is edited. Thus, without more strict controls on reporting quality and ethics, problems of accuracy are likely to continue.

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One, now perennial question has been the evolution of the present presidential system into a parliamentary system, in which power would rest with the National Assembly rather than with the president. This would, of course, strengthen the party process. First seriously discussed in 1990, this plan was seen by its advocates as a means to circumvent the single-term power of the president and ensure that a party might continue in power indefinitely, although factions within the party might shift. This was blatantly the Japanese model – the Liberal Democratic Party. Although it is said the Mr. Kim Young-sam had agreed to institute such a system when he became president, he reneged on his commitment to Mr. Kim Jong-pil. The issue is likely to be raised again at some future date.

There is no doubt that the political process in Korea is maturing and deepening the democratic process, with the result that decision-making will become more complex. It is imperative that the United States understand and be sensitive to these changes, and that Korea-related policy decisions should no longer be made solely in Washington or the Pentagon and then the Koreans informed of these events. The Koreans have expressed the need for real consultations on important issues. Inadvertent U.S. insensitivities to the events in Korea could exacerbate the development of ideological tendencies among parties that would be focused on anti-American sentiments, and could be deleterious to the U.S. interests on the peninsula.

Parties are slowly evolving, but the traditional concepts of the role and function of power are not easily overcome. Autocratic tendencies within party politics will not easily disappear. New institutional mechanisms will come to the fore, such as greater experience in local autonomy, that is still in its infancy, and we may expect that there will emerge a more vital, pluralistic intra-party democratic process. The role of youth cannot be ignored. If more senior politicians neglect their views, or are seen as too

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compromising or corrupt, or if they do not exhibit a clear sense of Korean nationalism, the youth may become disillusioned with the political party politics to the detriment of Korean pluralism. Transparent campaign financing and public accountability are necessary requirements that cannot be ignored. Pluralism seems alive and well, and living in Korea, but the political party process is a relatively new element of that trend. One can only hope that it will continue, grow, and mature. The United States must understand that this may make Korean-American relations more delicate, but as a Korean editor once said, we must know how to live in “delicate times.”

