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Special

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## [INSIGHT INTO KOREA(18)] Why are Korean politics so volatile, unstable?

The triumvirate of regionalism, personalism, and culture helps shape political landscape

This year marks the 20th anniversary of the June 10 civil uprising of 1987 and the 10th year since the outbreak of the Asian financial crisis in 1997. We have prepared a series of contributions from prominent foreign scholars to analyze the significant changes that Korea has undergone during the past two decades. We hope our readers can gain some insights into the nation's future from these articles. - Ed.

To many, if not most, observers of Korean politics, perhaps one of the most vexing problems since the transition to democracy in 1987 has been the erratic nature of party politics. Indeed, throughout the world, few democracies come close to matching the instability and volatility of the South Korean party system - a system that appears to be the epitome of chaos and confusion with short-lived, seemingly unprincipled, poorly disciplined and extraordinarily factious political parties.

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Cynics tend to see the instability of party politics in Korea as a product of self-serving, self-aggrandizing politicians and their followers. In this view, political parties are little more than convenient vehicles, or instruments, used to achieve individual political ambitions; thus, once the "party vehicles" outlive their usefulness, they are easily discarded and a new vehicle is chosen or, more typically, created.

To be sure, this metaphor is not entirely inaccurate, for it is clear that South Korea's political leaders have exhibited precious little fidelity to particular parties and, even more, to the ideologies the parties supposedly represent. From Kim Young-sam's alliance with the Roh Tae-woo's Democratic Justice Party, to Kim Dae-jung's deal with Kim Jong-pil's United Liberal Democrats, to the recent announcement by former Gyeonggi Governor Sohn Hak-kyu to leave the Grand National Party and join a breakaway "progressive" group, it is easy to see that many, if not the vast majority of, Korean politicians hold an essentially instrumental view of political parties.

Yet, to place the primary blame for the volatility of Korea's party politics on politicians themselves is, bluntly put, wrongheaded. It is equally misguided to attribute the shortcomings of party politics as a whole to weak, corrupt, or immature parties. To do either is to confuse cause with effect. In other words, the unstable nature of party politics in Korea must be seen, to a very large extent, as a product - an effect - of the larger socio-political, institutional, and even cultural context of which it is a part. As Frank Sorauf and Paul Allen Beck, authors of the classic text "Party Politics in America," nicely explain it, political parties "are in and of the political system, and one cannot expect that they alone among political institutions can escape the influences that shape everything around them."

This is not to suggest that politicians and parties are blameless or powerless, for both certainly can and do shape their own destinies, at least partly. Some "causal weight," in short, must be given to politicians and parties in explaining the predicament of party politics in Korea. Understanding this situation, then, requires a two-fold approach: First, we need to identify the underlying forces and processes - what we might call environmental factors - that shape and constrain the behavior of South Korea's politicians and parties; and second, we must identify the ways and extent to which these key political actors are able to impact those same forces and processes. This two-fold approach, in turn, means that we must look at the development of party politics in Korea as part of an interactive, reciprocal process.

Two key environmental factors are very easy to identify, as they have been the focus of a great deal of research and analysis. The first is the general context of South Korea's political development, which moved through a period of quasi-democracy to authoritarianism to full-fledged (procedural) democracy in the space of less than four decades. This process helped create a strong basis for a politics centered on individual leaders, otherwise known as personalism. The second derives from the existence of intense regionalism, which is a particular type of social cleavage based on

geography. Indeed, in Korean politics, geographically based cleavages might more appropriately be called "hyper-regionalism." Both of these factors, it is important to note, are integrally connected to each other and to the country's authoritarian (and quasi-democratic) past.

This is readily apparent when we look closely at the development of personalism. The almost undeniable success of Park Chung-hee in transforming South Korea from an economically backward country to a regional, even global, economic powerhouse served to idealize, even naturalize, the notion of the strong leader in Korean political culture. At the same time, the politics of the pre-transition period severely undercut the legitimacy of political parties, which were unable to exercise any significant autonomy. This was even true for opposition parties, if only because of the dominant and charismatic personalities of Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam. It is no surprise, then, that the party system had a very weak institutional foundation in the early years of Korean democracy.

By itself, the legacy of "strong leaders, weak parties" is not enough to explain two decades (from 1987 to 2007) of continuous and seemingly endless instability and volatility. After all, other political systems - such as Taiwan's - underwent a broadly similar process, yet emerged with relatively strong and stable party systems. To understand the distinctiveness of unstable party politics in Korea, therefore, we need to consider the impact of hyper-regionalism.

As even the most casual observer of Korea knows, intense regionalism has become a defining feature of the Korean political landscape. Regionalism, of course, is not purely a product of the post-1987 period: it has long-standing historical origins, but was exacerbated and amplified, if not given its most significant meaning, during authoritarian rule. The connection between regionalism and the instability of political parties, however, is not necessarily obvious.

To understand this connection, we can begin with a simple axiom: in electoral politics, politicians need votes. To get these votes, they often rely on finding and exploiting a political cleavage, such as socio-economic class, religion, ethnicity/race, gender, and so on. In many political systems, especially among Western European democracies, the most powerful political cleavage is based on social class. This is critical in that class-based cleavages tend to strengthen political parties by putting emphasis on ideological distinctions and policy agendas, rather than on individual candidates. In Great Britain, for example, it is taken for granted that political candidates are selected by the parties and elected as party

representatives, not as individuals.

As we already know, in South Korea the situation is quite different: the predominant political cleavage is territorial and revolves around the deep fissure between Gyeongsang Province (in the southeast) and Jeolla province (in the southwest). While a geographic cleavage does not necessarily lead to an unstable party system, in the highly charged political and economic context of Korean development this was almost inevitable. This is because regional differences-especially uneven economic development and the reality and perception of favoritism-provided a potentially unparalleled source of electoral support. Political leaders, therefore, focused their energy on co-opting regional identities as a way to build large and cohesive social and electoral bases. The marriage of personalism and regionalism, however, compelled political leaders to eschew clear-cut ideological or nationally oriented policy agendas, since they had to appeal to every voter within their region regardless of class, socio-economic, or other non-territorial distinctions. The result was a further weakening of party politics, for, under such conditions, a distinct, still less strong party identity could not be effectively established.

The interplay of personalism and regionalism goes a long way toward explaining the instability of party politics in Korea. It is worth mentioning, though, another important-albeit largely inseparable-environmental factor that interacts with both regionalism and personalism. This is culture, and more specifically, cultural norms that give priority to interpersonal networks based on family, clan, school and/or place of birth. The influence of culture on party politics cannot be quantified, but its strong relationship to regionalism and personalism is almost impossible to deny.

It would be easy to conclude from the discussion thus far that there is little that can be done about the instability of party politics in Korea. After all, the triumvirate of regionalism, personalism, and culture would appear to be a fixed part of the Korean political landscape. But this is not necessarily the case. While deeply embedded and undoubtedly powerful, no social process or force is impervious to change. In the Korean party system, however, change is likely to occur in incremental steps and at a concrete level. In this regard, particular attention should be paid to the institutional environment-that is, to the framework of rules, norms, and procedures that have come to define the practice of Korean democracy.

Initially, the institutional framework of Korean democracy served primarily to reinforce personalism and regionalism (and vice versa),

and therefore further undermined the development of strong and stable parties. Most salient was the establishment of a strong presidential system, which undercut the autonomy of both ruling and opposition parties. Other institutional procedures contributed to the continued fragility of political parties, such as the lack of primaries and the electoral system (based on limited proportional representation and the "first-past-the-post" principle). In isolation, none of these institutional features can or should be regarded as a "cause" of party instability, but in the context of South Korean politics-with its particular cleavage structure, its legacy of strong leaders, and its culture based on interpersonal networks-each contributed to the creation of, what some scholars call, a state of "hyper-presidentialism."

Environments (whether physical or social), of course, are not static. They respond to both external and internal stimuli. One significant internal stimulus has been an inevitable decline, although not disappearance, in the visibility and power of the old guard - i.e., the generation of strong and charismatic leaders who rose to prominence under authoritarian rule. This can be seen in part by the rise of the "386" and shinsedae generations. Generational change, combined with dramatic shifts in global and international politics and economics, has also unleashed heretofore submerged conflicts and tensions over the ideological and policy paths South Korea should or must follow on such issues as North-South relations, economic liberalization, U.S.-ROK security relations, bilateral free trade agreements, and so on. These various stimuli will and, to a certain extent have already, given impetus to institutional changes.

The introduction of primaries in the 2002 election, for instance, was partly a reflection of the decline of the "three Kims." Significantly, the popularity of the first-ever presidential primary by the governing Millennium Democratic Party virtually forced the GNP to follow suit, albeit only half-heartedly. And while the introduction of a primary system obviously did not resolve party instability - one need only consider the imminent decline of the Uri Party today - it did create the basis for more lasting change in the future. Indeed, the primary system has already become a "normal" part of the institutional framework, as recent announcements by "progressive" candidates and by GNP candidates seem to indicate. On this point, it is important to understand that political leaders and parties are "rational" actors. That is, in electoral politics, their goal is to win and hold on to political office; candidates, therefore, will employ the most efficacious strategy within a given institutional and socio-political environment. When environmental factors encourage opportunistic and self-aggrandizing behavior, that is the type of behavior we will see. When environmental factors encourage just

the opposite we can expect a corresponding change in political behavior.

In this process of change, it is important to emphasize, individual leadership will play a key role. At some point, leading politicians and their followers must not only acquiesce to the new "rules of the (institutional) game," but also encourage their further development. In this regard, the revision of election laws to prohibit those who fail to gain their party's nomination from running as an outsider-under the auspices of a new party-represents a significant step toward greater party stability. Voters, too, must recognize the debilitating elements of casting votes on the basis of personalistic and regional ties. Voters, of course, are also rational actors; as such, they must have an incentive to vote for parties rather than for individual candidates. This will not happen in isolation. Indeed, a movement toward greater party stability will necessarily be part of a broad interactive and iterative process where party politics develops hand-in-hand with the broader political and social systems.

This analysis is far from comprehensive. I have only touched on some of the most salient elements of party instability in Korea. I have also suggested a linear logic in Korea's political development, but this need not be the case. As we look around the world, in fact, we can find once well-established party systems in crisis or near-crisis. The death knell of the American party system, for example, has been rung more than once. Moreover, this analysis has ignored contemporary developments that suggest that political parties - hitherto, the primary vehicles for interest articulation and electoral participation in democratic systems - may eventually give way to new organizational forms, including nongovernmental organizations. Despite all of this, there is good reason to believe that political parties will develop strength, cohesion, and stability in Korea. Greater stability, to be clear, will not merely be a matter of time or political "maturity"; instead, it will be the product of identifiable processes of change over which all Korean citizens will have some responsibility for creating and pushing forward.

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