

The Evolution and Nature of Political Party in Post-Independent South Korea

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ABSTRACT: *The development of political parties and party systems is one of the most important indicators of an emerging democracy. Due to the roles the political party play and subsequently shape the party systems, it contributes to the bigger picture of the whole democratisation process. With the establishment of Republic in 1948 and introduction of universal suffrage political parties emerged in South Korea (Korea). The first line of political parties in South Korea were external parties in the sense that they were established outside the National Assembly. Syngman Rhee, the first president of Korea, was initially against the political parties sharing views of several thinkers during the French Revolution that the political parties would split into factions and would harm the solidarity and interest of the people on the whole. The outstanding feature of Korean Political parties remains its short average life. They does not exist in themselves, but are created with the formation of regime and disappear along with the demise of the regime. In this context, this paper aims to finds out the characteristics of political parties in Korea.*

Key Words: *Korean Political Party, Party System, Institutionalisation of Political Party*

Introduction

South Korean (Korea) democracy, being one of the classic example of third wave of democratisation, has took formal shape with the adoption of the Constitution of the Sixth Republic and subsequent 1987 presidential election, in which Roh Tae-Woo became the first directly elected President in 26 years to take power. From that period, successive fair and open-competitive presidential elections in 1992, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2012 and 2017 resulted in the election of six different presidents namely Kim Young-Sam, Kim Dae-Jung, Roh Moo-Hyun, Lee Myung-Bak, respectively. On several measures, all of these six presidential elections were administered freely and fairly. However, on the state of political parties and its development as well as consolidation, Korean democracy presents a distorted view as no less than nine liberal and seven conservative parties have been established and disestablished, either through mergers with other parties or splits within parties. This fact can be interpreted in the way that even though korean democracy has been consolidated and there is successful and fair transfer of power, within the democratic system there exists immature, fractious and underdeveloped party system. In this context, this paper after providing general concept of political party, talks about the evolution of political party in independent Korea and highlights its fundamental features such as the importance of political personalities as well as individuals, regionalism, and variable electoral systems. On the basis of these nature of party system in Korea, attempt has been made to draw the underlying factors behind weak and underdeveloped party system in korean democracy.

The Concept of Political Party

The word "political parties" is defined in various terms by scholars, and among them, Edmund Burke defined a political party as a people's collaborative effort of people that aims for national interest, upon some particular principle in which they are all that is pursuing a specific interest. In addition, Carl J Friedrich stated that a political party is an "a group formed to provide ideal and practical interests (benefits) to its members. A notable contemporary definition of the political party is defined by R. Gettel that "an organized group that consists of people and these members participate in a political unit to exercise their right right to vote, influence the government and conduct their own general policies. Similarly, Giovanni Sartori, who is an internationally well-known researcher on political parties, defined a party as "any political group identified by an official label that presents at elections, and is capable of placing through election, candidates for public office."

Although the definition of political parties varies, they all highlight the participation in elections and the interest to gain public offices and mandates as basic elements that characterise political parties. Political parties play an essential role within the democratic system. Since people hold different point of views, expectations, and opinions, it is necessary to have a venue where these differences are gathered, expressed, and represented by political parties. Without the mediating role of political parties, it is difficult to reflect

people's opinions on national policies. In other words, some main functions of the political parties include, political opinion-making, selection, function of integration, function of socialisation and participation, function of exercising political power, and function of legitimating.

Constitutional Provisions and Evolution

The year 1948 is marked as an important year in Korean history as it officially demarcated North and South Korea as each established its own government, diametrically opposed political, economic, and social systems from one another. On December 12, 1948, the General Assembly of the United Nations recognised the Republic of Korea (ROK) as the sole legal government of Korea. It was also in 1948 when the ROK Constitution was founded and the First Republic was established. There was yet no provision for political parties at that time, so political parties were treated in accordance with Article 13, the general association. Political parties that had members at the National Assembly were treated as a negotiating body according to the National Assembly Law. After a tragic war between North and South Korea from 1950 to 1953, South Korea settled into an “anti-communist regulated society”. Reflecting the society's caution against communism, in 1958 by Syngman Rhee, who was Korea's dictatorial founding president, forced the closure of a leftist party called “Progressive Party”, which was the first time in Korean history where a political party was shut down. Such forceful closure was because of Progressive Party's view on peaceful reunification was against the national policy and that the party members met up with North Korea's spies. The leader of Progressive Party, Cho Bong Am, initially received a five-year in prison sentence in the first trial. The presiding judge at the time, Yoo Byung Jin, ruled that “Progressive Party is not an illegal association and its principle policies do not violate national policies”. However, during the second trial the ruling changed to death penalty, which was carried out on July 31 of 1959.

Dissolution of a political party was possible since there were no clause in the Constitution about right to establishing neither a political party nor guidelines to disband a party. However, since the shutdown, the Second Republic Constitution introduced “political parties regulations” for the first time in 1960. It stipulates how political parties would be protected by the case, the government submission of a legal proceeding with the consent of the president and the Constitutional Court ruling would finally determine the party's dissolution.

The third Republic decided to move the political parties provision to article 7 of the constitution and added clauses such as candidates to assembly member and president must be recommended by their party (Article 36.3 and Article 64.3), if a party is disbanded then the assembly member would also be disqualified (Article 38) and a political party can be disbanded if at least 3/5 of the number of the supreme court judges. (Article 103). During the 4th Republic, the Yusin Constitution of 1972, it was added that “Political parties shall be protected by the State as provided by statute “ to the article 7 regarding the political party. Also, a substantial requirement for the dissolution of political parties was added as follow:

“[in the case of] where a political party's purpose and activities are contrary to a fundamental democratic order or threatens the existence of a nation”.

Constitution of the Fifth Republic in 1980, added to the article 7, the political parties provisions, about party funding by the government subsidy. (Article 7.3) In addition, more clear guideline for interpretation of the dissolution of political parties provision was established, setting a limit that “threat” in the article “threat to the existence of a nation” should be interpreted as “what is contrary to a fundamental democratic order”.

On October 29, 1987, the ruling party and opposition party acknowledged Korean citizen's strong aspirations for democracy and basic rights and agreed to the establishment of a Constitutional Court. The articles from 111 to 113 in Chapter 6 of the Constitution bestowed upon the Constitutional Court the adjudication on dissolution of political party among other matters such as constitutionality of statutes and impeachment. In addition, the last amendment to it was made in 1987 which amended article 8 as “Political parties shall be democratic in their objectives, organisation, and activities [..]” Now, there are more clear guideline for interpretation of the dissolution of political parties provision which , set a limit that “threat” in the article “threat to the existence of a nation” should be interpreted as “what is contrary to a fundamental democratic order”.

The Constitution of the Republic of Korea

Article 8 [Political Parties]

- (1) The establishment of political parties shall be free, and the plural party system shall be guaranteed.
- (2) Political parties shall be democratic in their objectives, organisation, and activities, and shall have the necessary organisational arrangements for the people to participate in the formation of the

political will.

- (3) Political parties shall enjoy the protection of the State and may be provided with operational funds by the State under the conditions as prescribed by Act.
- (4) If the purposes or activities of a political party are contrary to the fundamental democratic order, the Government may bring an action against it in the Constitutional Court for its dissolution, and the political party shall be dissolved in accordance with the decision of the Constitutional Court.

Features and Challenges for Party System in Korea

Korean political party system highlights its three major features in general: the importance of political personalities/individuals, regionalism, and variable electoral systems. These three features, individually and collectively, contribute to the instability of the Korean party system. First, in Korean politics, political leadership matters – or rather, individuals matter. More specifically, in the era of the ‘three Kims’ – Kim Young-Sam, Kim Dae-Jung and Kim Jong-Pil – political parties were created, dissolved and recreated to suit the needs of the individual political aspirant: They reigned over their respective parties as imperial party presidents who claimed unique control over the nomination of candidates, the appointment of party secretaries and officials, and the chairmanship of National Assembly committees.¹

Second, for the Korean electorate, regional identity and affinity matters. The regionalisation of Korean politics became prominent in 1963 with the presidential candidacy of Park Chung-Hee; ‘in that year, Yongnam, Park’s native region, voted heavily for him along with the adjacent rural areas of Honam, while provinces around Seoul voted for Yun, the major opposition candidate’.² This pattern has continued to destabilise the development of the Korean party system, even after the democratisation of 1987.

Third, Korea’s electoral system matters. The process by which the Korean President is elected has taken various forms since the founding of the First Republic in 1948. It has evolved from an indirect system, through which the president was elected either by the National Assembly, a joint session of a bicameral legislature, or an electoral college, to a post-1987 direct, popular election system. Similarly, the election system for the National Assembly has also varied greatly, alternating between single-member districts and proportional representation.

While all three of these features, political personalities/individuals, regionalism, and variable electoral systems, are helpful in explaining the nature of the Korean party system, the lack of any thorough consideration of international forces directly influencing the party system remains unjustified. No domestic political system operates in a vacuum, especially in Korea, where the United States has and remains a political force. The simple presence of 28,000 US military personnel stationed on the peninsula affirms the fact that US national interests play and have played an extremely important role in Korean electoral politics.³

In addition to the ever-present disruptive influence of strong political personalities/individuals, the party system in Korea has also suffered from a contentious regionalism as well. In the 1987 presidential election, Kim Jong-Pil and his party received much of their support in his native Chungcheong province, while Roh Tae-Woo was supported mainly in the southeastern provinces. More important, however, was the extensive and longstanding southwestern- southeastern provincial divide. This divide was cultivated in the Park Chung-Hee dictatorship, which begun the political tradition of rewarding supporters with government spending on local development projects.⁴ Because of this influence Korean presidents have on distributive policies, the citizens in the southwestern Cholla provinces felt discriminated against by regimes whose leaders originated in the southeastern Kyongsang provinces. As a result, these citizens residing in the Cholla provinces overwhelmingly supported the opposition parties in the 1987 presidential election, primarily Kim Dae-Jung’s Peace and Democracy Party.

The effect of regionalism was also acutely felt in the 1992 parliamentary elections, in which the Democratic Liberal Party lost its majority – Kim Dae-Jung’s Democratic Party was again strongly supported in the

¹Im, H. B. (2004). Faltering Democratic Consolidation in South Korea: Democracy at the End of the ‘Three Kims’ Era. *Democratization*, 11(5), 189.

² Kim, J. O. & Koh, B.C. (1972). Electoral Behavior and Social Development in South Korea: An Aggregate Data Analysis of Presidential Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 34(3), 846.

³ Ahn, B. M. (2003). *Elites and Political Power in South Korea*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁴Kim, J. O. & Koh, B.C. (1972). Electoral Behavior and Social Development in South Korea: An Aggregate Data Analysis of Presidential Elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 34(3), 846.

southwestern provinces, while the Democratic Liberal Party was less than strongly supported in many of the southeastern provinces.

Finally, regionalism in Korea continued to help determine the party system structure for both the 2007 presidential election and the 2008 National Assembly elections. As was the case in all previous presidential elections, the east- west divide was present in the 2007 election, but to a somewhat lesser degree. The 2008 National Assembly elections also displayed the traditional regional-based results – the conservative GNP was able to maintain its base in the southeastern provinces and in Seoul, the liberal UDP was heavily supported in the southwestern provinces, and Lee Hoi-Chang’s conservative LFP further entrenched its electoral base in Chungcheong, specifically Hongseong County.

Korea, to many scholars of area studies, is a very intriguing case since it has perfectly combined the traditional East Asian Confucianism, Western democratic values, and capitalism into one system in a impressive short period. Therefore, New York Times is right in identifying Korea as “Asian model of economic prosperity and political democracy” (New York Times, 1995, pp. 36-37).

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