

Korean Democracy under Kim Dae Jung: A Stalled Progression?

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I. Introduction

South Korea underwent fundamental economic and social transformation from the 1960s. Within three decades, a once-poor, overwhelmingly agrarian society was transformed into a nation with the fastest economic growth rate in the world and strong middle-class social aspirations. In terms of politics, however, the country remained, until the mid-1980s, a case where democracy lagged far behind the dynamic economy and society of increasing complexity. It was only in 1987 that South Korea entered an era of significant political transformation and made a decisive turn away from authoritarianism to democracy. Since then, Korean politics has been characterized by a search for a political structure that aims to achieve both economic prosperity and political democracy.

South Korea has lived under six Republics since 1948, each having its distinctive constitutional arrangements. A peaceful transfer of power took place for the first time in October 1987 with the advent of the Sixth Republic. President Kim Young Sam, who took office in February 1993, was South Korea's first

*This is a revised paper that I presented for the panel on "Korea on the Threshold of the New Millennium" at the 2000 EWC/EWCA International Conference, "Building an Asia Pacific Community," Honolulu, Hawaii, July 4-8, 2000.

civilian president in three decades. The election of President Kim Dae Jung, a long-time opposition leader, in December 1997, marked a new milestone, in which, for the first time, a peaceful and regular transfer of government took place from one party to another. Korean Society faces new challenges and opportunities as it enters the 21st Century. This paper will provide an overview of major issues and agendas of political development, as South Korea's new democracy moves to the next phase under President Kim Dae Jung. The economic crisis and President Kim's reform politics, decision-making and political culture, major political institutions and processes — such as the election, party system, and legislature — will be analyzed.

II. Economic Crisis and Reform Politics

By the late 1990s, South Korea's national economy reached a crucial juncture. In the past, low labor costs made it possible to sustain dynamic growth through export-led expansion. As time passed, however, industries had to be upgraded to achieve high-tech production and remain internationally competitive. But excessive wage increases, high capital costs, exacerbated bureaucratic red tape, not to mention institutionalized corruption, ended up weakening the global competitiveness of the economy. The chaebols, mainly family-run conglomerates that served South Korea well as the engine of growth in the 1970s and 1980s, lost their competitive edge in overseas export markets. Hence, demand grew to have the power of chaebols cut down. Meanwhile, external economic circumstances deteriorated, making the nation's economic prospects even worse.

South Korea was at the height of its economic crisis in December 1997, when Kim Dae Jung was campaigning for the presidency. Having won the presidency by a narrow margin, President Kim faced the formidable task of steering the country's much-needed economic reform, while ensuring the process of demo-

cratic consolidation in a nascent democracy. President Kim promised to reinvigorate the economy by trimming down the government and reducing red tape that stifled efficiency. He committed himself to striking a balance between labor and management, and pledged to introduce effective measures to support small and medium-sized enterprises. His administration also had to reshape the heavily indebted financial sector to enable it to conform to the requirements of the IMF rescue package. All the while, he promised greater autonomy for banks and other financial institutions. The economic choices that President Kim had to make to keep these promises were very hard. In fact, he had to demonstrate considerable leadership skills to implement the necessary economic reforms, while maintaining coherence in democratization programs. How effective has his leadership been in ensuring compatibility between economic reform and democratic consolidation?

On the whole, South Korea's economy made a relatively rapid recovery under President Kim's earlier tenure. Upon taking office, President Kim introduced a number of economic reform measures, some of which were considered "very successful," perhaps more so than the ones employed by other Asian countries affected by the regional turmoil. Within a year, his government claimed having resolved the liquidity crisis that triggered the country's virtual meltdown, and restored the pre-crisis growth level. In the meantime, Kim's government shut down 440 financial institutions, including five large commercial banks. Government had written off some 92 trillion won of bad loans, while recapitalizing all but two of the nation's 17 commercial banks to an internationally required level. It also strengthened regulations to make bank operations more transparent, stipulating that a bank's exposure to a single conglomerate should not exceed 25% of its total equity. The measure was to spur "more prudent lending" and force "many companies to raise capital on the stock market, where they face tougher public scrutiny."¹⁾

1) Quoted from *Far Eastern Economic Review* (June 8, 2000) p. 70.

As a result, with major economic indicators posting strong rebounds, South Korea was said by many to have successfully overcome the crisis. South Korea's national output went up to 10.7% in 1999, compared to 6.7% drop in 1998. Stockmarket Index rose from 300 during 1998 crisis to 1,000 by the end of 1999. During the first quarter of 2000, GDP soared again to 12.8% from a year earlier.²⁾ The fact, however, was that President Kim Dae Jung's economic reforms have been more popular in the outside world than at home. The reforms undertaken by the Kim administration in the labor, financial and corporate sectors have been hailed by many as "effective and successful." (Mo and Moon, 1999; Kim, 2000: 166-173) But reform in the government/public sector has been rather slow. One major challenge for the Korean government and President Kim Dae Jung was that, despite the macroeconomic achievements in his early years,³⁾ public support for the president and his ruling party had been on a steady decline. Why was the public approval rating for the president and his party declining in spite of the visible recovery and returning confidence in Korea's political economy?

Several accounts can be made for the declining popularity and legitimacy of Kim's regime. A simple reason given by those close to the ruling coalition is the so-called "anti-reform forces." This view often criticizes opposition parties for projecting an image of a government in "gridlock and disarray." "Without offering real alternatives," the opposition parties are said to "have faulted govern-

2) However, the economy slowed down again sharply beginning the second half of the year 2000; to 6% GDP growth (estimate) and 500 of the stockmarket index for the last quarter.

3) Opinions are divided, both at home and abroad, about the success of Kim Dae Jung and his government's economic reform as a whole. Many observers contend that the country's economic structure has not fundamentally changed, and there is still plenty to do to upgrade its international competitiveness. *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented in April 20, 2000 that two years of economic reform under Kim Dae Jung's presidency "have engendered" two new "biggest" problems: "paying down 200 trillion won in national debt and sovereign debt guarantees and closing the widening income gap between the rich and poor."

ment reform policies to score political points with their domestic constituencies."⁴) A similar account puts the blame on the anti-Kim Dae Jung sentiment of the *Youngnam* people and their hostile attitudes towards reform programs. The populous *Youngnam* provinces are also alleged to overlap largely with an area in South Korea where a majority is conservative and *status quo*-oriented. To these people, the President's reform packages are said to be a threat to vested interests and privileged positions. However, the validity of this argument is questionable, as it fails to take into account the diversity and complexity of attitude formation among people. Opposition parties, conservatives and the *Youngnam* people do not necessarily have identical policy preferences. Nor do people and organizations think or act solely on the basis of a common regional identity.

Neo-liberalist critics tend to emphasize the limits and constraints of the 'developmental state' of South Korea in initiating fundamental economic reforms. A developmental state can introduce economic reforms, some of which can be successful. But the reform here is quite different from the way neo-liberalists think of reform. They see it as being based on market principles with institutionalized means and due legal processes. From this point of view, economic reform in South Korea has largely resulted from the personal leadership and authority of the president, and not by due legal processes conforming to market rationality. That is, the government is at the center of economic policy making. Key decision-making still remains in personalized channels of command, especially of the agents and executives mandated by presidential power. But the paradox is that, according to this view, the Korean state that was the

4) One government sponsored conference report stated that, in citing Thailand's case, "attempts by opposition parties to exploit the (economic) crisis politically have helped erode public confidence by projecting the image of a government in gridlock and disarray." The Sejong Institute and National Endowment for Democracy, *Politics of Economic Reform and Civil Society Responses*, Summary of an International Conference, December 11-12, 1999, Sungnam, Korea, p. 4.

cause of the crisis had to command the reform programs to recover the market rationality, which was lost during decades of neo-mercantilist policy.

In this mode of reform, the economy can get by, as long as the president, his government and economic bureaucracy work effectively. If things go wrong in the public sector, as was the case with Indonesia's reform under Suharto, government-initiated reforms will be in serious trouble. Compared to the Western style of reform, there are three main dangers to this kind of reforms. First, economic reforms, based mainly on personal relationships, can easily degenerate into corruption and crony capitalism. Second, a person-based reform tends to be biased against change, whenever there is a challenge to the *status quo*. Or the reform can be held captive by interest politics, most likely favoring the wealthy and the powerful. Third, in order for a personalized reform to be successful, it requires a high-level of trust among the people in their political and business leaders. When people are cynical about their government and leaders, the reform is likely to fail. Korean society is particularly lacking in social trust and many people are cynical about the political elite and business leaders. Under these circumstances, it will be difficult for government-initiated reforms to provide the people with proper motives.

Another, perhaps more immediate reason behind the low support for President Kim and his party is the failure of the new government to account for the "real issues" of political society. When Mr. Kim was elected to the presidency in the middle of an economic crisis, many people expected that he would bring a new leadership to a nation torn by regional rivalry and moral hazards. People wanted the new president to go deeper than a mere economic recovery, reforming and restructuring the society to redress the "root causes of economic malaise." But after two years of his presidency, people began to realize that President Kim's style of leadership did not meet their expectations. For example, he missed the right time and opportunity to act decisively on political reform bills that were broadly supported by various civic groups. He failed to win broad national support by basing his appointment decisions on factors like

regional backgrounds or school ties. The President and the ruling camp refused to compromise with the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) that still has more seats in the National Assembly. Instead, it antagonized the opposition by resorting to divisive tactics such as a campaign to lure opposition assembly members to cross over and join the ruling party.

This, in conjunction with growing social polarization, breakdown of the middle class and inadequate social safety net programs during the economic downturn, made the president and his party unable to fulfill the promises they made to the people.⁵⁾ In addition, the potentially conflicting policy goals of the president were proven largely ineffective and did not produce much result. For example, President Kim openly pledged to achieve a parallel development of a market economy and democracy. He also pledged in mid-1999 to introduce a new "productive welfare" scheme. However, these ambitious goals were largely viewed as being 'empty' of real content and thus 'confusing'. They were primarily geared for political maneuvering, aimed at winning a majority in the general elections that were to be held on April 13, 2000.

Despite the democratization, little has changed in the party politics of South Korea during President Kim's half tenure. In late 1999 when Kim Jong Pil's United Liberal Democrats (ULD) broke away from the coalition with the President, the ruling camp was in desperate need of a big turnaround to win the upcoming general elections. In search of a winning strategy, President Kim decided in January 2000 to re-launch the ruling National Congress for New Politics (NCNP), the party he built less than three years ago to win his presiden-

5) In general, the impact of the economic crisis and the resulting shifts of the affected Asian economies towards a neoliberal mode tend to favor the rich, stronger, well-organized, pro-business groups, while discriminating those who are socially disadvantaged. Similarly, economic policies and crisis management programs in South Korea for the last several years have been criticized for favoring the affluent classes and business corporations at the cost of a majority of the population. The common people, the poor and low-income citizens were main losers of the economic crisis.

cy, as the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP). But the plan did not work well; the MDP was not very successful in recruiting 'new and fresh faces' beyond the regional base of the *Cholla* provinces. Like all other political parties in Korea, the MDP remains mal-institutionalized, incapable of mediating the interests of social groups in political society, and run by the president himself along with a few oligarchic bosses who exploit regional cleavages for power gains. Parties have come and gone upon his decision with little change.

Pre-election polls predicted pessimistic voting returns for the government party. Many voters were disillusioned by the administration's lack of progress in fighting corruptions among politicians and bureaucrats. President Kim's popularity fell down sharply when a string of bribery and ethics scandals involving high officials was disclosed. Loss of the presidential popularity and mounting concern about the stalled political reform meant an increasing split votes among electorates along regional divisions. This in turn boosted opposition parties. President Kim needed a convincing majority of his party in the April 13 general election in order to assert his authority and carry out the reform he started but was running out of steam. Only three days before the general election, the government announced a plan to hold a summit meeting between President Kim and North Korea's Kim Jung-Il. The summit announcement was timed to give the new MDP a political advantage. However, it did not ease the disillusionment of voters, nor have a significant effect on how they voted. In the April 13 general elections, the MDP failed to win a majority in the National Assembly. The MDP won 115 seats, while the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) won 133 seats out of the total 273 seats.

The election results again showed that the good economic record did not help President Kim and his party to win the support of the voters. It was also disturbing to see regional antagonism had gotten worse during the previous two years of his presidency. When he came into office, he had promised to ease the historic animosity between the *Kyongsang* and *Cholla* regions. But instead he filled many top posts with natives of his *Cholla* provinces. This

angered people in *Youngnam*, and the verdict of political division was clear. Not a single MDP candidate was elected in *Youngnam*, and not one member of the opposition won a seat in the *Cholla* area. In *Cholla* area, more than 90 percent of the vote went to the president's ruling MDP party, while the same fraction went to the opposition party in the city of Pusan, the most populous city in *Youngnam* area.

In result, the verdict of 2000 general election still left the crisis-torn country under a divided government. When Kim Dae Jung won the presidency in 1997, he had to form a governing coalition with Kim Jong Pil's ULD. That coalition fell apart in December 1999. And now, even if he renewed the coalition with the ULD, the presidential party would still not control a majority. He renewed his drive to lure independents, minority members of the assembly, and defectors from the opposition. This further antagonized the ruling-opposition party relationships and stalled the MDP's initiatives in the national assembly. Thus, even a strong "imperial presidency" like that of Kim Dae Jung could not effectively govern the polity. With only two years left of Kim's five-year presidential term, South Korea still remains uncertain about an orderly succession of political power. Debates over constitutional revisions are temporarily suspended in light of the very poor electoral records of the ULD in the last general election, whose top leader (Kim Jong Pil) has been a long-time, outspoken advocate of parliamentarianism. But the constitutional issue is not completely mute. If not a shift to parliamentarianism, the current constitution may be amended soon to rectify some negative aspects of the current presidential system, including a change in the presidential term from a single 5-year to two consecutive 4-year terms.

III. Political Institutions and Processes

Peculiar historical and institutional features of Korean politics have set a 'path

dependency' on South Korea's road to democracy. Principal political challenges that contemporary South Korea faces are primarily the result of its historical experience and developmental status as a new democracy. The constitution of the Republic of Korea adopted a modern Western system of government and political institutions under popular sovereignty, with separate executive, legislative, and judicial branches and a bill of rights. But these institutional features have thus far been respected "more in form than in substance." The founding constitution adopted in 1948 was amended 9 times. The autocratic rule of Syngman Rhee during the First Republic set a bad example of manipulating the constitution through frequent amendments. Military leaders later usurped constitutional power for some thirty years. The last amendment in 1987 was the most significant one for democracy, as it restored the long-fought popular election of the president and strengthened guarantees of individual rights. Since then three presidents ran the Sixth Republic, with the basic structure of government remaining essentially the same.

Following South Korea's liberation and independence, the establishment of new political institutions 'preceded' — rather than 'followed' — the expansion of mass political participation and the mobilization of new social groups into politics. (Khil, 1984: 53-54; Ahn, 1993) This made Korean politics suffer from "politics of mobilization" (*unilaterally*) led from above, rather than evolving from civic society (*interactively*) and participatory activities initiated from below (*voluntarily*). In the Korean context, political mobilization led from above had a tendency to reinforce top-down politics, political authoritarianism both at the top and the bottom, a hierarchical pattern of authority relationship, and centralized direction of political activities. The trend was maintained consistently until the 1980s. Only in recent years, the development of political institutions began to correspond more closely with the demands and need of the political society and citizen participation. And bottom-up politics started to develop slowly and gradually in Korean society, as civic organizations became outspoken and labor movements increasingly volatile.

In the meantime, Korean society had to suffer acutely from a growing gap between political institutionalization and political participation as well as the disharmony between the two. Changes in political institutions and progresses made in their processes for the last decade of democratization have been remarkable and positive. Yet, they have been slow, sometimes painful, and took a longer time than the development in the social and economic spheres. This gap has led to the general feeling of institutional performance lagging behind expectations, mass dissatisfaction and alienation from politics, perception of a widening elite-mass cleavage, low trust in public agencies, and weak legitimacy of the governing elite and political institutions in the eyes of the public. "Mass politics and culture in democratizing Korea" is well known for a lack of trust and low confidence on the part of the public in government programs and public services.⁶⁾ For example, schools, the health care system, pension fund management, and financial institutions have increasingly been viewed as "ineffective," "unresponsive," "unfair" and "unreliable." Various state agencies — courts, political parties, police, tax administration, and so on — are viewed as "corrupted," "high-handed," "costly," and "unaccountable."

Opinion surveys in Korea keep warning that a majority of citizens do not have trust in the government and their leaders. Diminishing public confidence in political institutions will undermine the legitimacy of the state and its proper operations. Worsening legitimacy weakens the basic capacity of government institutions to function and produce public goods. Also, declining commitment in the public sector disengages people from social "activeness" and retracts them to over-rely on "personal trust" primarily embedded in kinship, regional identity, or closed and informal patron-client relationship. That is, "social capital" will erode.⁷⁾ When a political society is poorly endowed with 'positive'

6) Doh C. Shin systematically analyzed mass political culture of South Korea in his recent book with a same title. *Mass Politics and Culture in Democratizing Korea*, Cambridge University Press, 1999.

7) Social capital is defined by Putnam (1993) and others (Fukuyama, 1995) as the community

social capital, the civil society cannot grow and mature, and integrate the interests of individuals and social groups. Participation by Koreans in voluntary social associations is low, while associations based on primary relations such as kinship, school ties, localities and regions are strongly identified and taken much more seriously. In Korean society, individual interest and personal trust do not add up to higher social capital or “civic” culture. Perhaps, Korean society — like many other Asian societies — nowadays requires a new basis for integration. The state may have to reorient its national political development strategy. Political institutions in turn are to be reshaped so as to nurture a new form of positive ‘political capital.’

In sum, the 21st Century challenges of the globalizing political economy and the wave of democratic upturn pose formidable tasks for the state, political leadership and civil society in South Korea. How responsive are the major political institutions and their processes in meeting the challenges? How effective are they in performing the tasks of democratic consolidation? What progress has been made so far in the political institutionalization of democratic processes?

IV. Democratic Consolidation: Progress and Prognosis

Electoral Politics:

The performance of South Korea’s electoral politics has been poor until recently. The values of election like choosing the elite or changing policies have been respected in principle. But in reality, a typical response to election

culture indispensable for facilitating the formation of voluntary associations, making citizens trust and cooperate in the larger social context, ensuring democratic performance of the state and local political institutions, promoting economic prosperity, and solving the dilemma of collective action by keeping a polity from entrapping excessive egoism and authoritarian temptations.

results has been increased repression and authoritarian regression rather than improvements in leadership and policies. For example, a rigged election in 1960 led to the downfall of the Syngman Rhee regime; and the near-defeat of President Park Chung Hee in 1971 led to the establishment of a more authoritarian government structure. Nevertheless, the succeeding regimes allowed periodic elections in South Korea to choose representatives and presidents, broadening the base of mass participation in political life. Also, it was mainly through the electoral process that the political system has been able to provide a "non-violent channel for public displeasure." (Macdonald, 1998: 125)

16 general elections for the national assembly have been held since 1948, largely by direct vote. Of the fifteen presidential elections, eight times have been by direct popular vote, twice by the legislature, and five by electoral colleges. Local elections were held first in 1952, but suspended in 1961, only to be restored 30 years later in 1991. Full elections for councils and heads of local governments were held in 1995. Before democratization, elections were often carried out as a matter of routine, and formalistic act of ratifying elite decisions. After democratization, elections have become more regular and transparent, and have come to be perceived as legitimate channels for participation. Growing demands by the population, with students and intellectuals in the forefront, for more freedom, equality, and voice in public decisions helped greatly in this process.

Despite these developments, South Korea's electoral process still does not provide a strong base for a liberal, responsive, representative democracy to take full shape. Although the rules of the electoral games have been made more regular and predictable, the underlying basis of party politics and candidate nomination has not markedly changed. Neither does the election outcome significantly affect the president's domestic and international agendas. Voters in South Korea are still fed up with party infighting, scandals, and corruption in election periods. Few clear ideological and policy differences can be found between parties and their nominees. People say they "want to change politi-

cians," but they have no proper candidates as "the bosses control the entry gates." The National Election Commission reported that 16% of the 1,153 candidates who ran in the last general elections had criminal records warranting prison terms. Around half of them were reportedly convicted for "socially unacceptable" crimes such as tax evasion, bribery and assault. Civic groups came up with a "blacklist" of unacceptable candidates, and openly appealed to citizens to vote against them. The list included, on top of the criminally convicted, those who evaded mandatory military service, or were involved in scandals or associated with the previous military regimes. The campaign drew a considerable amount of public attention and was particularly highly supported by younger, progressive voters, including college students.

These observations attest to the fact that South Korean voters are still racked by the legacy of the past, and will have to continue their uphill battle for a renewed political life. Adding to this 'political fatigue', the nation's political process remains torn by 'personalism' in decision-making, divisive regionalism, a lack of tolerance and compromise in political culture, and a party system incapable of tuning itself to the increasingly pluralizing and contentious citizens and social groups.

Decision Making and Political Culture:

South Korea's political process has long been centered on the presidency and the central administrative branch of the government. The President is constitutionally empowered with extensive prerogatives. The justification for the all-powerful executive has been that it is necessary to contain North Korean threat to national security and maintain rapid economic growth. The presidents often usurped the executive prerogatives on the pretext of threats to national security and economic growth. The monolithic power structure with the president at the center has remained virtually untouched throughout the change of times and regimes, and the process of modernization. Power below the president has been characterized by "subordination, submission, and passiveness."

(Paik, 1991) The current presidential system accepts the preponderant power of the presidency. Such an arrangement may be functionally acceptable, if the president exercises his power for the collective good. But under poor executive management, the system does not provide sufficient institutional checks to counter poor decisions.

On the other hand, the national assembly has never been strong and always remained subordinate to the presidency. Politicians at the local level have been weak in autonomy and dependent on central control and administrative guidance. Cabinet members, including the prime minister, have been chosen by the president, a majority of whom usually (but not necessarily) from outside the national assembly. They act principally as administrative heads, having rarely been allowed to build their own independent political power base. They are also in office only for a brief period of one year or two at most.⁸⁾ In short, the personalization of presidential power has characterized Korean politics as a one-man-rule system. Successive presidents have ruled the country almost as “elected autocrats.” Three presidents of the Sixth Republic in democratizing Korea — Roh Tae Woo, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung — were not the exceptions.

This one-man-rule elite system has been persistently challenged by opposition parties, student activists, intellectuals and progressive Christian forces, that led the movement politics in the 1970s and 1980s. The democratic transition afterwards brought about the direct election of the president, diminution of executive power, elimination of the pervasive military influence in government, more press freedom and the implementation of democratic rights. While the presidential power is being curtailed gradually in recent years to allow more flexibility, responsiveness, and checks and balance, the preponderance and domination of the executive power structure is still a major target of political

8) The average tenure of South Korea's cabinet ministers since 1947 was around one year and eighteen months. Ministerial tenureship tends to become even shorter under the democratic governments of Roh Tae Woo, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung.

bickering and criticism. The opposition Grand National Party that controls the majority now has attempted to use the national assembly as the center of policy contention. But the system remains essentially the same, and the old practices still persist. In effect, the president is not accountable to the parliament; monopolizes the cabinet appointment and executive power; presides his own party, and more importantly, controls the nomination process.

In addition, informal decision making practices play a significant role in the actual process both in the government and private sector. Rules and regulations often do not reflect the real process in the high politics of South Korea. (Hwang, 1966: 315). The more important and contentious the decisions, the more likely they are made on the basis of an informal, narrowly based, closed elite system. Informalism produces a factional polity. For example, top positions in the Blue House and elite bureaucrats are recruited and promoted through informal networks. In informal politics, factions are frequently formed around kinship, common geographic localities or shared academic training. Factions also coalesce around a charismatic politician who is capable of offering his followers the prospect of political, social or economic advancement. As the primary grouping factor is the desire for power, it is difficult to distinguish factions by any fundamental differences in political values or policy positions. Also, as political advancement in factional politics is dependent to a great degree upon the protection and backing of a powerful patron, it is not uncommon for politicians to express greater loyalty to their patron than to a policy position. As a result, in factional politics, much of the energy in the decision making process is wasted on the "contention" itself rather than being devoted to the "deliberation" of substantive policy issues.

Personalism, informalism and factionalism have been dominant features in Korean politics. They are often attributed to the lack of key cultural elements necessary for building a healthy representative democracy. Personalism in power tends to consolidate authority and political initiative in the hands of the president. The process distorts the elite recruitment system by recruiting only

those subservient to the charismatic leader. The elites are often recruited on the basis of personal trusteeship and ascriptive criteria, as they can easily be dismissed whenever confidence is lost or the leader falls from power. Because of this, the political culture of submission and compliance to authority is kept unchanged. Informalism in decision-making causes corruption, scandals and secrecy. It also widens the elite-mass cleavage in their perception of political issues, and keeps causing disrespect for authority and power holders.

Factionalism creates an elite system that is prone to conspiratorial activities. Also, it slows down the development of viable political parties. When and where factionalism counts, little attention is paid to the expansion of proactive civic participation or the development of political parties that are necessary to build broad ideological bases of support. Also, party members will support their leader unconditionally in the hope that he will attain power and bestow advantages upon his followers. Contemporary political parties in South Korea are notable for their factional strife. All political parties have failed to establish a broad mass base of political support. Parties have rested largely upon the top down organization rather than popular support of social groups. In consequence, the party system remains highly unstable, short-lived, and mal-institutionalized. (Ahn & Jaung, 1999) Parties perform only a few functions within the political system. Primary amongst these functions is to "formalize" the process of candidate nomination in election times. In non-election years, the parties are less active and usually subordinate to the personal commands of the top power holders.

The impact of the aforementioned process is responsible for making the political culture of South Korea easily subject to the "zero-sum politics," or what G. Henderson called the "politics of the vortex," the key features of which are centralization, factionalism and authoritarianism. (Henderson, 1968; Macdonald, 1988) When power and politics are considered a "business of life and death" to the participants, it is likely that elections will also be seen as a life-or-death issue and is highly costly. And once elected, the power is easily corruptible.

Severe power struggles and competitions also allow little room for compromises, negotiations, and tolerance, all of which are considered essential for a mature representative democracy. Thus, South Korea's politics-dominant society tends to intensify the conflict and struggle for power hegemony, and in turn breed internal rivalry and factional competition among closed, unstable, less autonomous elite groups. The rule of rulers and culture of political authoritarianism can easily preempt the rule of law and institutions. Korea's Confucian traditions have additionally contributed to the authoritarian political culture in which rulers rule and take it for granted that the masses will follow the commands of elite leadership. In consequence, the new democracy in South Korea is still locked in a political system of "elected autocracy" or "imperial presidency."

In the past, the existence of a hostile regime in the north has strengthened South Korea's political culture of authoritarianism. The fear of military threat and invasion from North Korea often justified the need for a strong government and a commanding authoritarian leadership centered on the personality of the president. The question now is, what effects will the easing of tensions between the two Koreas have on the politics and culture of South Korea?

V. Conclusion: Assessing Kim Dae Jung's Leadership

As South Korea enters the twenty-first century, it is confronted with the double needs of having to revitalize the economy and consolidate its democracy. The democratization process of the past decade helped the polity to move irreversibly from an authoritarian to democratic system. Yet, the legacies of the authoritarian past — personalization of power, elite rule, regional cleavages, a lack of institutionalized political processes — are blocking the nation's path towards a mature democracy. The age-old culture and practices of the political authoritarianism have persisted in spite of the evolving democratic contexts. A

national consensus has been lacking on the agenda for both economic restructuring and political democracy. Kim Dae Jung won his presidency at the end of the 1997, when South Koreans found the nation nearly torn by “democratic fatigue” and “moral hazard.” His ascendancy to power after a life-long democratic struggle was hailed by many of his countrymen, if not overwhelmingly, as an opportunity to set the nation embattled by political divisions onto a new developmental course.

Kim’s early presidency helped the country to recover quickly from the dramatic currency crisis of the late 1997. The crisis also called forth “an impressive unity among Koreans,” one that would have empowered his leadership to set the fire to accomplish “the second building of the Korean nation.” However, as far as the domestic reform is concerned and democratic consolidation in particular, Kim Dae Jung’s presidency for the past three years is judged as having “squandered the opportunities,” largely by “continuing to lead the country in an autocratic way.”⁹⁾ As a matter of fact, the effect of the 1997 economic crisis has led Kim’s government to “reinforce,” rather than challenge, “the personalization and centralization of the political system.” President Kim made a breakthrough with the North Korea in 2000. But so far, he has failed to build a domestic consensus to support his “sunshine policy.” The key also is that North Korea is yet to show real commitment and visible movement for internal change and reform, if not fully reciprocating to the South’s offer.

Coming to power with a minority constituency, the president had to form his first cabinet with a coalition of Kim Jong Phil’s backing. Since then, he has not really tried to build new constituencies for his power and policies. Instead, he tried to govern with a mix of ‘old boys network’ of his personal aids formed during his life-long exile and jail, “loyal outsiders” and “sitting bureaucrats.”

9) Quotations here and after in the concluding section are from the Report of the Pacific Council on International Policy Task Force, entitled as “Assessing Korea and Promoting Change,” Second Meeting, Yonsei University, Seoul, Korea (December 13, 2000). This report was made available to me by one of the participants.

Many of his hand picked high officials turned out to be “inexperienced,” “ineffective” or “not quite fit for governing,” and they had to be replaced constantly by the pre-existing pool of limited people whom the president personally favored. In effect, Kim Dae Jung and his government talked about many reform agenda, but brought about little visible effects in reality. Reform programs in the labor, social security, business sector, public corporations, and government operations were seemingly impressive, but they proved to be “disconnected from both the country’s political and economic possibilities.”

The April 2000 general election was taken as a “virtual referendum” on Kim’s presidential leadership and policy positions. The result vividly showed a diminishing confidence in the presidential leadership. The regional divisions in Korean politics became more striking, and even worsening under his presidency. President Kim’s autocratic leadership style is being discredited not only by his opponents but also by the country’s mainstream social and economic elites, including intellectuals. He is deeply distrusted by business sector, and perceived as a radical populist. *Chaebols* view his anti-*chaebol* policy as “ideological revenge, not as sensible economics.” Trust and credibility of his leadership is also being lost in the labor, which was for long his own constituency. With Kim’s presidency less than two years to go and having failed to build a broad constituency, people have already begun to talk about early lame duck. It is also said that, “even his Nobel Prize was controversial beneath the surface in Korea,” and that, having exhausted power base, “even his friends have begun to worry about his capacity for governing” and “are openly concerned about the next several years.”

In sum, South Korea’s political system faces a number of challenges in the advent of a new century of economic globalization and amid a worldwide spread of democratization in the post-Cold War context. First, Korean politics should become “more formal, less personalized and less centralized.” Second, the quality of political leadership and government performance needs to be improved in order to meet the citizens’ growing demands and rising expecta-

tions. Third, economic reforms and democratization programs have to be better coordinated so as to upgrade the quality of life for the people at large and help create a renewed sense of social integration, political legitimacy and cultural identity. Forth, political institutions and their processes should be reshaped to promote positive social values. What is needed most and urgently in Korean society is more trust and credibility in leadership and policy deliberation. Fifth, the values, goals and norms of democracy and the rule of law need to be firmly rooted in the culture and behavior of the people as well as of the elite. Finally, the future of the Korean democracy depends largely on whether it develops a social and economic base that can lead to a peaceful reunification of the two Koreas, and thus give the people of North Korea an opportunity to live under democratic rule.

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