

シンポジウム報告

Less Polarized but Disaffected Political Parties in Korea

Cheol Hee Park (Professor, GSIS, Seoul National University)

I. Implication of Park's Victory in the 2012 Presidential Election

Park Geun Hye won the presidential election in December 2012, which means the continuation of conservative dominance in Korean politics after the Lee Myong Bak regime. However, the victory of Park was not a natural outgrowth of conservative dominance among the electorate. Korean politics, unlike Japanese politics, has long been characterized by virtual two party competition between conservative and progressive camp. After ten years of ruling by the liberal Kim Dae Jung and Roh Mu Hyun regimes between 1998 and 2007, conservative Saenuri Party grasped power from 2008. Another conservative politician, Park Geun Hye, could secure political power in the presidential election in 2012. However, pundits say that Korean presidential election ends up with almost 51 to 49 ratio in the end. The election of Park was not an exception. One can hardly expect a landslide election by one camp. Exceptional presidential election outcome was that of 2007, where Lee Myong Bak won over opposition candidate by more than five million votes. Personal dislike against Roh led to this surprising outcome.

However, the victory of Park was never a easily-expected outcome. Park took a very strategic political move to attract new layers of voters while consolidating existing conservative voters.

First of all, though Park and Lee belonged to the same party, Park always tried to differentiate herself from Lee Myong Bak regime and kept arms-length distance from

Lee regime. This made it possible for Park not to assume any responsibility about the wrong doings or mistakes of the Lee regime. Park has always been featured as a challenger to Lee rather a supporter for Lee.

Second, from March 2011, Park took a strong initiative of raising social welfare issue and advocated the agenda like economic democratization, which actually meant for equalizing the quality of life among different classes by redistributing the fruits of economic growth. These are originally the political issues taken by the progressive or liberal camp rather than by the conservative political circle. Raising the social welfare agenda preemptively weakened the opposition camp. The political weapons of destruction, which could originally strengthen liberal opposition camp, was already taken by the ruling party challenger, Park. So from the earlier stage of presidential campaign, Park secured a nice position in the ideological spectrum of Korean politics. As a daughter of former president Park Chung Hee and a former president of the ruling Hannara Party, she could easily secure support from the conservative circle. It is usually said that about 35 percent of Korean electorates who are conservatives are ready to give their ballots to conservative presidential candidates. So the name of the game was how to expand the scope of political support to the median voters. Park could push the liberal political candidates to the corner by presenting herself as a candidate who could take care of concerns of lower middle class and part time workers. Economic democratization and thickening welfare benefits for the poor targeted these layers of electorates who position themselves as median voters.

Third, Park Geun Hye has fully taken advantage of an inconvenient political coalition between radical lefts and moderate liberals within the opposition camp. Lee Chung Hee, who belonged to the radical lefts, heavily criticized Park during the campaign period. She made a personal verbal assault to Park by even saying that she ran for the presidential election to drop Park from the competition. Even though these radical lefts invited strong criticism from the general mass, the opposition camp who shared personal network with them stemming from student activist movement could not dissect the extremists from their tentacle. Hence, opposing liberals were viewed as a partial supporter for the extremists, which opened a large ideological space in the middle. Being heavily criticized by the extremists, Park could comfortably consolidate conservative voters. The voting rate of the 50s, which went over 89 percent, shows the unusual consolidation of conservative union in times of

presidential election.

Hence, the victory of Park in the 2012 presidential election is the combined result of personal differentiation strategy within the ruling camp, extending political arms to the median voters, and conveniently utilizing extreme voices within the opposition camp. In terms of inter-party competition in the ideological space, Park could secure existing conservative supporters, embrace voters in the middle by using liberal rhetoric, and isolating extremists in the opposition camp. It is not an irony at all that Park identified herself as a de-polarizing candidate while depicting opposition candidate as extremely polarizing personality. As a result of Park's election, Korean politics looked as if it is less polarized than before.

II. Changing Korean Electorates: Region, Generation, Ideology

One of the critical faults in the strategy of the opposition camp was that they blindly accepted the taken-for-granted assumption in Korean politics. Those assumptions were: the younger the voters are, the more progressive they are. Voters in the 20s, 30s, and 40s have been considered as more liberal and progressive oriented, compared to the aged voters over 50s who took more conservative orientation. This assumption was not necessarily wrong. However, the opposition camp took light of the long-term general trend in the demographic change. Between 2007 and 2012, voters over 50s increased by more than four million voters, which reflected the slow and steady progress of aging society in Korea. As more and more voters are getting into their 50s, they tended to vote for the conservative voters. It does not necessarily mean that aged voters naturally turned to ideologically conservatives. One often neglected phenomenon is that the aged voters do not like sanguine, pejorative, extremely critical words and attitudes. They want to see politicians behave themselves rather than recklessly throwing out any words. They constituted a main proportion of dislikes of the so called Lee Chung Hee phenomenon.

Another assumption that has been neglected by the liberal opposition is that the younger generations in their 20s are getting conservative. Unlike the 30s and 40s, who have caring attitude toward failing North Korea, voters in their 20s have developed very different conception about North Korea. They saw Chonan incident and Yonpyeong shelling as an outgrowth of unstable and provocative North Korean

leadership. Also, they could hardly accept Kim Jung Un as a respectable leader at all, because Kim also belonged to the 20s. Because of increasingly unstable, provocative, isolated North Korea, younger voters tend to have less sympathy toward North Korea. Furthermore, voters in their 20s experienced Asian experience when they were kids. When they became adults, they could hardly find a good job because of economic hardship and volatile employment system that Korea developed after the Asian economic crisis. As an extension, they had little luxury of enjoying economic affluence unlike the previous generation. These socio-economic environments led to the conservative shift among the voters in their 20s.

Another illusion that the opposition camp did not get out was that the combination of metropolitan voters, who used to be critical to the ruling party, and voters living in the Cholla province, who always adamantly support the opposition party would lead to the victory in the presidential campaign. What they have neglected to see was the increasing number of voters in Chungcheong province and decreasing population in the Cholla province. Dividing the nation into the East and the West is not enough to win majority voters in Korea. In other words, the opposition party neglected the duty of enlarging the support bases in a nationwide manner.

These changes in the configuration of Korean voters led to the victory of the ruling Saenuri Party in the general election in April, 2013, again. Opposing Coalition for New Politics is still debating what is the efficient strategy to grasp power in the next presidential election.

III. Disaffected Political Parties and Popularity of Non-Professionals

Despite the outlook as a lopsided victory of the ruling Saenuri Party over the opposing Coalition for New Politics, shared agonies among the professional party politicians are going deeper than expected. At the heart of their agony is that professional party politicians are not popular and disaffected by the general electorate. Korean voters contain deep mistrust toward party politicians. They are seen as being rude, engaged in violent infighting among themselves, neglecting the duty of serving people, corrupt, having disrespect for the underprivileged, caring about political money at all times, having no skills of compromise and etc. Political parties and

national assembly stands at the top of the public institutions that the general mass distrusts most. Though most of them are aware of this popular sentiment, party politicians still enjoy the luxury of playing the game among themselves.

The so-called Ahn Chul Soo phenomenon illustrates the case in point very well. At this moment, he joined the opposition party and once assumed the leadership of the party. He lost steam now. However, before he became a professional politician, he was wildly popular, especially among the young voters. He was originally a medical doctor, a developer of anti-virus vaccine program for the computer, and a professor at Seoul National University. He gained his fame as a speaker, circling around university campuses and talking comforting stories for the heartbroken youngsters. A few TV programs helped him pave a way for his political ambition. He was quite popular not because he is a professional politician with ambition but because he was an amateur but decent social entrepreneur. His single word of support made it possible for Park Won Soon, civil movement activist, to be elected as mayor of Seoul. However, his fame went a downhill road after he entered a political circle and became one of them among the professional politicians.

Recently both ruling and opposition parties sent a love call to Ban Ki Moon, secretary general of the United Nations, as a potential presidential candidate for them. It is quite unusual in that Ban Ki Moon have not confessed his political ambition for Korean president yet. Also, within both the ruling and opposition parties, there are politically ambitious personnel who are preparing for the presidential election. Despite the presence of professional politicians, who have both ambitions and talents, those professional politicians are asking for help to non-political leader to run for presidential campaign for 2017.

This should be called as the poverty of politics. How to fill the vacuum is an everlasting challenge for Korean politics in the years to come.