



CHAPTER 3

**Democratic Consolidation and
Comparative Political Perspective on the
2002 Presidential Election in the ROK**

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Democratic Theory

During the “Third Wave” of democratization that began in the late 1970s, more than 100 countries across the Southern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East became democratized. However, among them, fewer than 20 countries remain democratic today.⁴⁷ South Korea is one of these few and presents itself as a good case to examine various issues arising from the process of democratic consolidation. This chapter will analyze several issues of democratic consolidation in South Korea by examining the significance and major characteristics of the 2002 presidential election. It will also elucidate the implications of the election for democratic consolidation in South Korea in the long run.

The common-sense usage of the concept of democratization refers to a regime change from an authoritarian to a democratic one. It is a “process of achieving broad and deep legitimation, a

⁴⁷ Since the publication of Samuel Huntington’s seminal work, *Third Wave: Democratization of the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1991), intellectual discussions have focused on the question of democratic consolidation. See, for instance, Larry Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 7, No. 3 (July 1996).

belief that the democratic regime is better than any other alternative for their society.”⁴⁸ When a political regime is in transition from authoritarian to democratic, the democratic rules of the game must be immediately agreed upon among major political actors even if they are yet to be tested in a new political setting. Therefore, a major task in democratic consolidation is to build consensus on democratic rules of the game for resolving conflicts among major political actors and forces. In Juan Linz’s phrase, democratic consolidation takes place when a belief that democracy is “the only game in town”⁴⁹ is shared among major political actors. If the consensus is successfully built and maintained, a newly established democratic regime can be expected to last for a foreseeable future, and thus to be consolidated. One of the key indicators for consolidation is whether a government can be formed by free and democratic elections two or three times consecutively.

The choice of political institutions is another crucial factor that affects democratic consolidation.⁵⁰ Democratic consolidation is closely linked to how well different types of governmental, electoral, and party systems function as they shape the mode of intermediating various interests and demands and resolving conflicts in a newly democratized political setting. The presidential system is argued to be more handicapped for democratic consolidation, compared to the parliamentary system.⁵¹ According to Juan Linz, as the stakes are high in a presidential race, election campaigns often become fierce and heated, making it more difficult for losers to accept election

⁴⁸ Diamond, “Is the Third Wave Over?” p. 33.

⁴⁹ Juan Linz, “Transitions to Democracy,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 13 (1990), p. 156.

⁵⁰ Adam Przeworski, Michael Alvarez, Jose Antonio Cheibub and Fernando Limongi, “What Makes Democracies Endure?” *Journal of Democracy* Vol. 7, No. 1 (January 1996).

⁵¹ Juan Linz, “The Perils of Presidential system,” *Journal of Democracy* (Winter 1990), pp. 51-69.

outcomes gracefully. Charges of election rigging abound, which could result in a questioning of the legitimacy of the democratic rules of the game by those who are excluded from political power.

Furthermore, political stalemates are likely to take place when the president's party fails to secure the majority of the legislature. Under the parliamentary political system, political stalemates would lead to dissolution of parliament and a new election that could resolve the deadlock. However, in the presidential system, due to a fixed term of office of the president, the president can survive a hostile legislature dominated by opposition parties, leaving a political stalemate unresolved. Such legislative paralysis could lead to a political crisis that questions the viability of the new democratic regime.

Political stalemate under the presidential system can be compounded by a fragmented party system in which no single party holds a legislative majority. An empirical analysis points out that "combining presidential system with legislature where no single party has majority status is a kiss of death."⁵² According to Giovanni Sartori, the nature of the political party system is associated with the number of parties and ideological distance among them. He argues that the two-party system with moderately fragmented parties tends to show centripetal tendency while one with fragmented parties shows centrifugal tendency.⁵³ The former tends to provide a regime with political stability and thus is conducive to democratic consolidation. Also directly related to democratic consolidation is the presence of extreme parties that pursue fundamental changes of political order and the democratic rules of the game. G.B. Powell asserts that significant popular support for such parties poses a serious

⁵² Przeworski, Alvarez, Cheibub and Limongi, "What Makes Democracies Endure?" p. 46.

⁵³ Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 314.

threat to resolving conflicts within a democratic setting and creates difficulties in forming a democratic government and ensuring responsible transfers of power.⁵⁴

The 2002 presidential election in South Korea clearly shows that democracy is at work with both opportunities for, and challenges to, consolidating democracy under the presidential system. In order to understand the historical meanings of the 2002 presidential election, the following section will briefly examine various issues of democratic consolidation that arose in South Korea's new democratic setting. Then, major significance and characteristics of the 2002 election and their implications for democratic consolidation in South Korea will be analyzed.

Issues of Democratic Consolidation in South Korea

Almost two decades have passed since the 1987 democracy movement in South Korea. During this time, democracy in South Korea encountered many opportunities and challenges. For the first time in South Korean history, political power was transferred to an opposition leader, Mr. Kim Dae-jung, through a democratic election without any serious political hangers in December 1997. South Korean democracy survived the serious economic crisis of 1997. Also, civilian control over the military has been well established since the mid-1990s.

However, South Korean democracy faces many challenges that are yet to be overcome. Among them, political stalemate, regionalism, and retarded development of the modern political party system stand out. Unless successfully tackled in a new democratic setting, these issues could pose serious problems to the democratic consolidation process in South Korea. As

⁵⁴ G. Bingham Powell, Jr., "Party Systems and Political System Performance: Voting Participation, Government Stability and Mass Violence in Contemporary Democracies," *American Political Science Review* (December, 1981), pp. 861-2.

discussed earlier, one of the problems inherent in a presidential system for democratic consolidation is the possibility of political stalemate between the executive and the legislature. Since the democratization of 1987, this issue has persisted in South Korean politics as all ruling parties failed to secure the majority in the National Assembly elections. In 1990, it was only after the merger of the then ruling Democratic Justice Party with the other two opposition parties, the Reunification and Democratic Party led by Mr. Kim Young-sam and the New Democratic Republican Party led by Mr. Kim Jong-pil, that the newly formed Democratic Liberal Party was able to command the majority in the legislature.⁵⁵ However, in the following National Assembly election of 1992, the ruling LDP came one seat short of ensuring the majority in the legislature. It is interesting to note that South Korean voters have opted for strong opposition in the legislature. As a result, the political stalemate returned even after the majority was secured by merging the three parties.

Political stalemates mainly derived from strong performance of the opposition parties in general elections, which occurred in spite of the failure of presidential candidates from these parties in presidential races. For instance, parties of Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam together became successful in commanding the majority in the 1988 general election even after the defeat of their leaders in the presidential race of 1987. When Kim Dae-jung was elected as president in 1997, he also faced strong opposition parties in the National Assembly.⁵⁶ All three ROK

⁵⁵ For further analysis on the nature of the merger of the three parties, see Heng Lee, "Uncertain Promise: Post-1987 Democratic Consolidation in South Korea," in Edward Friedman (ed.), *The Politics of Democratization: Vicissitudes and Universals in the East Asian Experience* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

⁵⁶ In 1996 general election, Kim Dae-jung's Party for People's Assembly earned only 79 seats while Kim Young-sam's New South Korea Party earned 139 seats.

presidents since 1987 had to serve their terms facing strong opposition in the legislature.

The viability of opposition parties is based on regionalism, which is one of the most peculiar characteristics of South Korean politics. Since those who resisted popular demands for democratization and direct presidential elections lost their power in 1987, people in a democratizing camp lost a rallying cry of democratization in securing political support. Regionalism became a newly found fault line that is most effective in political mobilization. Even though it was a mere coincidence that the two key political figures, Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung, within a democratizing camp were from Youngnam and Honam regions respectively, their uncompromising contention for presidency ignited regional rivalries in 1987.

Since the 1987 presidential election, regionalism has been a predominant factor in virtually all presidential and parliamentary elections. For instance, four major parties dominated their respective regions in the 1988 general elections: the Reunification and Democratic Party won 23 seats out of 37 electoral districts of its stronghold, Pusan-Kyungnam region; the Democratic Justice Party won 30 seats out of 39 in Kyungbuk; the Party for Peace and Democracy won 37 seats out of 37 in Honam; and the New Democratic Republican Party won 15 seats out of 27 in Chungcheong.⁵⁷ A similar pattern continued until the 2000 general election.

In terms of democratic consolidation, regionalism poses an interesting dilemma. On the one hand, a moderately fragmented party system of three or four major parties has been maintained because of a secured regional base. As a result, small and extreme parties were deterred; thus it was easier to maintain

⁵⁷ Choi Young-jin, *South Korean Regionalism and Politics of Identity* (in Korean), (Seoul: Orum, 1996), p. 195.

consensus on the democratic rules of the game. On the other hand, because regionalism overshadowed other important cleavages of ideology and generation, political parties were not encouraged to compete with different policies and specific issues, which deterred the development of a modern political party system. As political parties became rent-seekers benefiting from regionalism, voters tended to support parties not because they preferred their policy stances or ideologies, but because they had no other choice.

Significance of the 2002 Election for Democratization Process

The 2002 election was a significant turning point in the process of democratic consolidation for several reasons. First, it was the first election in which none of three Kims (Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam, and Kim Jong-pil) was directly involved as a presidential candidate. Considering the three Kims' strong influence in different regions, their absence was expected to result in mitigation of regionalism in election outcomes in particular and the post-election political dynamics in general. The election outcomes would indicate to what extent regional rivalries, especially between Youngnam and Honam, continued to be effective in mobilizing political support. If regionalism lost its grip, political parties would have to compete on concrete issues and policies, thus leading to the evolution of a modern political party system. As discussed earlier, the modern political party system is conducive to democratic consolidation as long as small and extreme parties do not become popular.

Second, the 2002 election was the first election in which political parties had to compete with different political orientations and specific policy issues as regionalism was expected to fade away. In fact, throughout the election campaigns, the progressive Democratic Labor Party mobilized significant political support in ideologically conservative South Korean politics. Depending on the success of this party, ideological distinction would be clearly

pronounced among major political parties; the conservative Grand National Party, the reform-oriented Millennium Democratic Party, and the progressive Democratic Labor Party. Thus, the 2002 election can be regarded as the first election in which a battlefield was formed between the left and the right even though it was lopsided toward the center and the right.

Third, the 2002 election provided an opportunity in which one could observe new patterns of political participation that have developed since the 1987 democratization. The democratization process has provided an open space for voluntary social organizations to take part in politics and to make their voices heard. They dealt with a variety of issue areas such as environment preservation, consumer-rights protection, and women's equal rights. Grassroots and nationwide voluntary social organizations played an active role in election campaigns. Also, the ruling Millennium Democratic Party introduced a nationwide primary system for choosing a presidential candidate instead of selecting a candidate through a brokerage of a few power elites. The new experiment encouraged genuine public interest and political participation from below instead of mobilization from above.

Major Characteristics of the 2002 Election

Regional Cleavage

Regional cleavage has dominated the voting behavior of South Koreans for many decades. The last election, however, became the first election since 1971 with none of the three Kims vying for presidency. It marked the end of the "Three Kims Era" and raised the expectation that the power of regional cleavage could be mitigated. Regional cleavage, however, proved to be persistent even without the three regional leaders. The election results showed that Mr. Roh Moo-hyun swept the Honam Province while Mr. Lee Hoi-chang received an overwhelming

support from the Youngnam area. Mr. Roh obtained the support of 93.4% of the Honam voters. This is only 1.3% less than what Mr. Kim Dae-jung received in the previous election. In Youngnam, Mr. Lee received 66.7% of the votes, an increase from the 53.3% he secured in 1997. On the other hand, Mr. Roh received less than 30% of the votes in Pusan and Kyungnam and around 20% in Taeku and Kyungbook.⁵⁸ This demonstrates that the regional cleavage between Youngnam and Honam dies hard.

Nevertheless, the election showed that the regionalism has signaled a change in both Youngnam and Honam areas. In Honam, although Mr. Roh's quantitative support was similar to that of Mr. Kim Dae-jung, his support was qualitatively different from Mr. Kim's. Looking at the support rate for Mr. Roh over the several months before the election, it fluctuated from 45% in July to 30% in September and to 34% in November.⁵⁹ In August and September 2002, his support rate was lower than that of Mr. Chung Mong-joon. Even in November 2002, one month before the election, more than one-third of the Honam voters had not decided which candidate to vote for. This indicates that the support for Mr. Roh in Honam was not based on personal and regional loyalty as was the case for Mr. Kim, thus was not stable and consistent.⁶⁰

In Youngnam, Mr. Roh received more votes than Mr. Kim Dae-jung did in 1997. In addition, the support rate for Mr. Roh from the younger voters turned out to be much higher than the overall support rate for him in this region. In Taeku and Kyungbook, for example, Mr. Roh received over 32% of the votes from those younger than 44 years old while only receiving 20% overall votes in these areas. Mr. Lee Hoi-chang could defeat him by

⁵⁸ The National Election Commission, *The 16th Presidential Election Data* (Seoul, 2003), p.5.

⁵⁹ Kang Won Tak, "2002 Presidential Election and Regionalism," (in Korean), unpublished paper.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

getting 63% more votes in the group of older than 45 years old while by only 17% more in the younger group.⁶¹ This illustrates that the effect of regionalism is different on different generations. One implication is that the younger generations could choose their candidate based on other factors than regionalism.

Generational Cleavage

One of the most pronounced characteristics of the last election was that voters were divided dramatically according to age. Those under 40 years old voted for Mr. Roh by a margin of almost two to one, while those over 50 preferred Mr. Lee by 61 to 37%. People in their 20s and 30s are half of the voters, but, traditionally, cynical or indifferent to politics. However, in the 2002 election, the generation of the 20- and 30-year-old voters seeking change from the old political system became Mr. Roh's core supporters, rallying support over the Internet. What is noticeable is the abruptness of the emergence of this young power. Until the election, no one was sure to what extent the stark generational split would affect on the election outcome, for two obvious reasons. For one, to support a candidate is one thing and to actually cast a vote is another, especially when the younger generation's voter turnout remained quite low. For the other, as there are other cleavages that cut across the generational gap, its net effects remained uncertain.

However, the younger voters demonstrated not only an unusually high voter turnout but also keen interest and an active involvement in the campaign process. During the campaign, they organized the NOSAMO (literally meaning an association of those who love Roh) and helped Mr. Roh win the election. Eighty percent of NOSAMO members were in their 20s and 30s. They were prominent in organizing and funding Mr. Roh's campaign, as seen in their fund-raising of more than 7 billion

⁶¹ The National Election Commission, pp.12-3.

won (5.9 million dollars). The existence of NOSAMO indicates two points that are worth noting. First, it was made up of relatively young volunteers. Its members were predominantly in their 20s and 30s. Second, it shows an importance of the Internet as a new medium in mobilizing political support. These new generations went from political apathy to passion, emerging as a major political force in the election. What the South Korean press has dubbed the “386 generation” became the core force for change and set the stage for a dramatic generational shift in South Korean politics.

These younger voters are the first Internet generation. The Internet and mobile phones unite them, leading to their emergence as the salient driving force in politics. In this sense, the last election opened a new era of e-democracy that will unfold in the years ahead. The 2002 e-democracy also brought forth the phenomenon of the “digital divide.” It is reported that the older generation felt alienated and suffered from psychological panic after the election. The new mode of communication through the Internet has also changed the concept of politics and political parties. The People’s Party for Reform illustrates the case. It was born on the Internet, and has attracted 43,000 members in just six months.⁶²

Ideological Cleavage

The generational cleavage tends to coincide with the ideological cleavage. It is observed that people tend to become more conservative as they get older, which was clearly demonstrated in the 2002 election. Besides the aging effect, what is peculiar in South Korea is a generational or cohort effect, which finds people in their 30s more progressive at times than those in the 20s.⁶³ The 386-generation that experienced the radical activism

⁶² *The JoongAng Daily*, Seoul, March 3, 2003.

⁶³ Kang Won Tak, “The 16th Presidential Election and Generation,” (in Korean), presented at the seminar on “The Significance and Process of the 16th

during the democratization movement of the 1980s formed a distinctive generational cohort in the South Korean society. It is this generation that spent their adolescent years under General Chun Doo-hwan government when the South Korean student movement became radicalized after the Kwangju massacre in May 1980. Many from this generation were exposed to very intensive discussions on Marxism and the fervor of the *juch'e* ideology throughout the 1980s.

In other democracies, ideological cleavage mainly originates from class and socio-economic differences. In South Korea, however, it is mostly manifested in the political arena due to the North-South confrontation. Such political issues as unification, the National Security Law, the Sunshine policy, and anti-Americanism ignite more ideological disputes than economic issues do. It is true that the ideological polarization of the 1980s was subdued in the early 1990s, because the student and labor activists could no longer mobilize substantial mass political support. This, combined with the frustration faced by some radical activists after the collapse of the socialist bloc, brought a gentler activism to the forefront in the 1990s in lieu of the radical approach. Many former student activists were absorbed into various civic groups that became specialized and diversified in the 1990s. Nevertheless, as can be seen in the Hanchongnyun case, which was declared a subversive organization sympathetic to the North in 1997, ideological disputes continue to simmer in the South.

Moreover, the Sunshine policy of the Kim Dae-jung administration resulted in a South-South split along this ideological line. To conservatives, this policy only encouraged North Korea to dictate the terms of rapprochement with the South for its own benefit. In a nation originally founded on anti-

Communist principles, the long-suppressed ideological divisions flared up, even showing the tendency to tap into the existing regional factionalism and generational split. The South Kyungsang Province, former President Kim Young-sam's electoral stronghold, showed the lowest level of approval of the Sunshine policy.⁶⁴ Also, according to a South Korea Gallup poll in 2003, only 20% of those younger than 40 thought North Korea would target the South with its missiles and bombs, while 40% of those older than 50 said an attack by North Korea was possible. The Sunshine policy opened a new ideological battlefield.

This battlefield is not likely to disappear easily, since South Korean society is still ideologically lopsided toward conservatives. According to a South Korea Gallup survey on Dec. 19, 2002, 43.7% of those polled said they were conservative, 23.8% middle of the road, and 29.4%, progressive. In the last election, the middle-of-the-road voters went with the progressives. In this sense, some argued that the election was a failure for the conservatives, not a victory for the progressives.

On the other hand, some contend that the 2002 presidential election was about a "paradigmatic shift," as many former student activists emerged as a core political power after the election. Those who once were labeled as pro-Communists or sentenced to death by military governments were brought into the political system after many years of struggling against the authoritarian system. They have emerged as the mainstream of South Korean politics and make up a significant portion of President Roh Moo-hyun's advisers and personnel.

The new government that inherited the core of the Sunshine policy and absorbed progressive forces as close aides to the

⁶⁴ South Korea Social Science Data Center, *Post-Election Data*, 2000 (in Korean).

president could intensify the ideological cleavage. When President Roh hinted at lifting a ban on the radical student group, Hanchongnyun, many of whose members were convicted under the National Security Law, it ignited a heated nationwide debate. The 2002 presidential election accentuated ideological strife between conservatives and progressives, and gave the mandate to the latter.

Conclusion: Implications for Democratic Consolidation

Although how these cleavages will play out in South Korean politics remains to be seen, the 2002 election provides a window of opportunity to examine their implications for democratic consolidation. As discussed earlier, regionalism had been a predominant factor in South Korean politics and retarded the sound development of a modern political party system. Party leaders could count on votes from their regional bases and, accordingly, were able to exercise tremendous power within the party. Though regionalism looks intact on the surface, the 2002 election indicated that the regional cleavage began to be undermined as other elements including the generational gap and ideological orientations came into play. If regionalism continues to lose its grip on elections, it will be conducive to democratic consolidation in South Korea; political parties will be forced to compete on the basis of ideology and policy issues rather than blind regional loyalty. Moreover, as regional-based party leaders lose their intra-party dominance, intra-party decision-making processes, including a nomination process, will become more democratic. The Millennium Democratic Party's national primary system was viewed as an important stepping stone to intra-party democratization. South Korean democracy will come one step closer to its consolidation.

The generational split, one of the most dramatic characteristics of the 2002 election, must also be understood in the context of democratic consolidation. The rise of the young political class is

closely related to the “Net culture.” The Internet and mobile phones became major instruments of uniting the generations in the 20s and 30s. In one of the most wired countries in the world, the younger generation showed how the e-democracy could work. This may signal a new era in South Korean politics with mixed implications in terms of democratic consolidation. The rise of the Net generation and its active participation in politics will put some pressure on the region- and personality-based political parties, forcing them to embrace new demands by implementing various reforms. Efforts to reform the top-down nomination process into a more open primary system are already in sight in major parties. However, if political parties fail to keep up with the rapid pace of the Internet age, they could fall short of performing their role of aggregating and articulating political demands from the society, thus facing a crisis of *raison d’etre*.

Even though the Internet could energize greater political participation from below, it could also be a powerful instrument for political elites in mobilizing popular support. When elites rely heavily on the channels outside of the political system by circumventing political parties, it might lead to an e-democracy that could become a captive of populist demands. This could create an undue burden on a democratic political system.

The dictum “to agree to disagree” catches the essence of democracy. It shows the necessity to tolerate different ideas and views in order for democracy to work. At the same time, for a newly democratizing regime to take root, it is also necessary to build a consensus on how to resolve conflicts arising from differences. In other words, democracy must be viewed as “the only game in town.” The 2002 election clearly shows that the level of democratic consolidation in South Korea was advanced enough to tolerate fierce debates and competition among various socio-political groups with different ideological orientations. Ideological strife became acute between the conservatives and the progressives and between the young and the old.

In general, an ideologically polarized society proves to be a futile ground for democracy. When extremists exert significant power in challenging democratic rules of the game, the regime could face a systemic crisis. Thus, a wider ideological spectrum that can afford progressive parties, can be more conducive to democratic consolidation as it will discourage extremists to disavow the democratic rules of the game. Inclusion, not exclusion, tends to moderate extremism. However, a wider ideological spectrum among political parties can spell a fragmented party system that could also be harmful to democratic consolidation. Therefore, the wider the ideological spectrum the more essentially these political parties accept the democratic rules of the game in order to prevent a political stalemate from leading to a systemic crisis in which the democratic rules of the game are put into danger. The 2002 election in South Korea demonstrated that there was a firm democratic ground of consensus on the rules of the game, which was accepted by different ideological groups and on which the progressives successfully challenged the conservatives. As long as people agree upon the democratic rules of the game when attempting to resolve their differences, ideological competition could be viewed as an indication that democratic consolidation is well under way. 