



CHAPTER 6

**Role of the Internet in the ROK
Presidential Election in 2002**

Huh In-hae

**Internet as Tool of Mass Mobilization and Political
Organization**

In 2002, Korea witnessed unprecedented domestic developments and profound political changes where the Internet was a major driving force. In particular, the solidarity displayed by the “Red Devils,” the candlelit demonstrations, and the birth of NOSAMO became the Internet-driven epoch-making events.

NOSAMO, a Korean acronym for the political action group calling itself the “People Who Love Roh Moo-hyun,” played a significant role behind the successful nomination of Mr. Roh Moo-hyun as the presidential candidate for the ruling Millennium Democratic Party in the national primary election that was adopted for the first time in Korea. The 50,000 members of NOSAMO supported Mr. Roh Moo-hyun in many extraordinary ways. They sent personally written support letters to the election campaign headquarter; they, along with their children, cheered for Mr. Roh Moo-hyun at every rally; and they voluntarily raised billions of Korean won for the Roh electoral campaign fund, which was basically a collection of the members’ monthly salaries and allowances.

It is noteworthy that following President Roh's successful bid for the presidency, many Korean politicians set up their own fan clubs on the Internet to mobilize the support base and promote their political fortunes in cyberspace. For example, in 2004, supporters of the first female leader of the opposition Grand National Party, Mrs. Park Gun-hye, daughter of former President Park Chung-hee, established her political fan club online and called it PAKSAMO, hoping that PAKSAMO will be able to reproduce the success of NOSAMO in the next presidential election in December 2007.

Figure 6.1 PAKSAMO Poster Designed to Show Military Support for Park Gun-hye



There always have been soccer fanatics in Korea. Peaceful demonstration has also been a common form of anti-war protest used by Koreans. However, without the Internet, the global

ROK Turning Point

community would not have been able to witness firsthand the fervor of the “Red Devils,” the peaceful candlelit demonstrations, and the activities of NOSAMO in Korea in 2002. The “Red Devils” were initially organized by a group of netizens, fervent Korean soccer fans, in the mid-1990s. To support and cheer for a local soccer team, a number of soccer fans got together, and at that gathering, someone proposed to form an organized support group for the national soccer team. Their plan was announced on the Internet, and to their surprise, a great number of netizens responded with great enthusiasm. They formed an on-line fan club, thereby laying a foundation for the inauguration of the “Red Devils.”

Figure 6.2. “Red Devils” Soccer Fans During the World Cup in June 2002



The grand scale candlelit demonstration held in downtown Seoul in 2002 was also initiated by a netizen, who represented himself with the Internet ID “Angma.” During the Internet discussion of various issues surrounding the execution methods of the prevailing form of protest in Korea, he suggested a different approach to protest, peaceful but also very effective, i.e., a

candlelit demonstration. The idea caught fire, giving birth to a wave of the candlelit demonstrations in 2002.

Figure 6.3. Candlelight Demonstration in Seoul



Internet as Tool for National Agenda-Setting

In recent years, Korea realized remarkable achievements in establishing the knowledge-based information networks throughout the nation, interconnecting every corner of the society including the government, media, and business circles. During the Kim Dae-jung administration, information technology infrastructure was built on a massive scale, and this nationwide project is still continued today.

Application of the Internet in Korea is quite similar to that of the Western world. However, there is one unique difference -- its role in Korean politics. The Internet has become a medium for

ROK Turning Point

the general public's involvement in political developments in Korea. Urgent voices advocating the need for further democratization and political resolution of the deeply entrenched social conflicts have saturated the Internet in Korea today.

Entering the 21st century, the role of Internet in Korean politics has increased even more. The public flooded the Internet, challenging politicians on various political problems, including the "old ways of politics" based on little popular political participation, regionalism, strong biases in Korean major print media, on major social issues concerning the restructuring of Korean conglomerates, the increasing gap between the wealthy and the poor, South-North Korea relations, educational opportunities, social inequalities, and government corruption. The presidential election in 2002 presented the public with an even greater opportunity to increase political participation and voice different political opinions.

In the 1990s, the Internet discussions in Korea also dealt with some of the post-modern issues preoccupying the Western world, such as abortion, sex, environment, and protective measures for different minorities. However, they did not carry the same significance as the issues concerning the pro-democracy movement or nationalism in stirring the public opinion.

As numerous examples from other countries demonstrate, democratization of a nation usually involves active participation from the masses. For Korea, the June Democratization Struggle in 1987 marked the initiation of such mass involvement in the pro-democracy movement. However, since the late 1980s until the early 2000s, the democratization process in Korea had progressed without substantial results. Naturally, the public's discontentment towards politicians had been building up until recently when they found the right opportunity and the right outlet, the presidential election in 2002 and the Internet, to voice their opinions.

One of the notable achievements of the June Democratization Struggle in 1987 was the establishment of a direct presidential election system. The authoritarian indirect presidential election system established by the military governments of Generals Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan was replaced by a direct presidential election system as a result of the June 1987 Struggle. However, it took more than a decade for the Korean people to institutionalize a civilian administration in Korea.

After Mr. Roh Moo-hyun was defeated three times in Busan, his hometown, because he did not belong to the party that was based there, the public was infuriated and fed up with the regional bias and political maneuvers. Mr. Roh's supporters decided to come together to form the "Nosamo," the online support club for Mr. Roh. The result was Mr. Roh's victory in the 16th presidential election in December 2002.

Another achievement the public managed to accomplish through the effective use of the Internet was that they successfully pressed the ruling Millennium Democratic Party to allow a non-party member to run in the national primary election for the first time in the history of Korean political development.

Today, the voices of the public yearning for political reform and direct participation in Korean politics continue to saturate the Internet with increased force and determination. Without the Internet, the epoch-making political developments in recent years in Korea would not have been possible.

Liberal Internet Versus Conservative Traditional Mass Media

The significant role the Internet played in the Korean politics could be better understood when the unique media environment in Korea is examined. For several years, a media reform has

ROK Turning Point

been one of the most important social issues facing the Korean society and polity. Three major conservative newspapers published in Seoul – the "Chosun Daily," the "Joongang Daily," and the "Dong-Ah Daily" -- control over 70 percent of the Korean media market, and they exercise undeniable influence over the national public opinion. These print media outlets are widely believed to be guilty of manipulating political news reports. For example, their reporters tend to quote government officials out of context, thereby distorting the original intent of the interviewees, in order to serve the political interests of their conservative-leaning owners.

In contrast, the Internet delivers news reports in full context to avoid any possibility of distortion. It also provides in-depth reports on the issues that are edited or cut out by the major print media. Throughout his political career, Mr. Roh Moo-hyun faced a number of personal difficulties as a result of print media maneuvering. One of the most notable cases was the major print media's distorted report on Mr. Roh's possession of a luxury yacht. As part of its "black PR" campaign aimed at assailing Mr. Roh Moo-hyun's personal character, one of the major central conservative dailies alleged that Mr. Roh Moo-hyun, a former human rights lawyer, falsely pretended to come from the proletariat background while in fact he was enjoying the lifestyle of a bourgeois by owning a yacht. After reading that article, many readers imagined a beautiful, expensive yacht, something one would see in the Hollywood movies. However, in reality, it was a one-man dilapidated boat worth less than a set of golf clubs. In order to combat this allegation, Mr. Roh's campaign headquarters released a photo of his "yacht" on the Internet and posted an interview with the former yacht club president who knew Mr. Roh in person, so everyone could see how distorted the print media's report was.

The media environment in Korea and the advanced information infrastructure have provided increased opportunities for the

public to be involved and participate in politics. One of the significant achievements of the Internet in Korean politics is that it has allowed the voices of the younger generation in their 20s and 30s to be heard. Until recently, people in their 40s were the dominant players in politics. However, the Internet has blurred such distinctions, allowing all generations to actively participate in politics.

Another notable achievement of the Internet is that it has expanded opportunities for the public to have easier access to specific information and knowledge in politics. Until recently, information- and knowledge-sharing in politics was only possible through print media. However, through the Internet, unlimited access to information, including top-notch research papers on politics, can be retrieved at the command of one's fingertips. An amateur researcher can now form his own political views and circulate them, if he wishes to, over the Internet, to be shared by all.

The Internet has revolutionized the conventional way of information flow through newspapers, radio, and television, which was one-way, by allowing interactive sharing of information in politics. Now the public can freely make comments, either supportive or negative, on every politician's political views. The Internet has become a communication medium between politicians and the general public. Various online political clubs have also facilitated the public's participation in politics in Korea.

During the live television broadcast of the December 19, 2002, presidential election, the Korean Broadcasting Service Co. used a drag and zoom interface system to show the vote results in real time, which was created by a Korean software development company called Innotive. It was a brand new system that could analyze expected vote counts according to exit polling, analyze candidate support levels according to education, income and

ROK Turning Point

race, and convey the progress of the election visually. Innotive said, “During vote count broadcasts, new large-size data is generated in real-time, and, therefore, one cannot design and produce computer graphics in advance,” and added, “With this new system of data compression, storage, and real-time graphic processing, however, broadcasting companies can deliver vital information faster in a visually more appealing fashion.” It is interesting to note that Global TV of Canada relied on this drag and zoom interface system to cover the Ontario provincial elections on October 2, 2003, and the U.S. broadcasting company CBS used it to broadcast the results of the presidential election in the United States on November 2, 2004.

Internet as Tool of Political Fundraising

In the past, the influence of money was dominant and pervasive in Korean politics. Basically, any candidate could buy political support with the slush funds raised from Korean conglomerates. Public participation in politics was not desirable and blocked at all cost. After the election, corrupt elected candidates usually tended to cater to the special interests they were indebted to and quickly forgot their campaign promises. However, the advent of the Internet truly revolutionized political financing in Korea. Today, political parties encourage full participation by the general public in politics because of their newly discovered capability to raise public funds over the Internet. They believe that Internet fundraising may become a foundation of future “clean politics” in Korea.

For example, “Nosamo,” a fan club for politician Roh Moo-hyun, was initiated via the Internet and is still active today. The online fan club for Mr. Roh Moo-Hyun was initially organized by a group of netizens who shared and supported Mr. Roh’s political beliefs. Mr. Roh was the only politician in the late 1990s who had the courage to challenge the “fat cats” and regionalism, one of the most deeply rooted phenomena in Korean politics. After

Mr. Roh's repeated political defeats because of the lack of financial support from big businesses, regionalism, and authoritarianism, a netizen called upon Mr. Roh's supporters to come together to form an online support group, called "Nosamo," for Mr. Roh Moo-hyun. They voluntarily raised monetary funds to create and operate the Internet site for "Nosamo," which became a driving force behind Mr. Roh's political campaign and led his camp to the final victory on December 19, 2002.

In 2002, the Millennium Democratic Party successfully introduced a national primary election for the first time in Korean history. The Roh Moo-hyun administration is called "participatory government." Both epochal events hold special meaning in that they reflect the wishes of the general public.

Internet as Battlefield of Political Ideologies

With the advancement of the Internet, the political landscape in Korea has experienced dramatic changes. Generational division no longer exists on the Internet. The Internet has successfully opened the door to the public to participate in politics, regardless of age. It further contributed to changes in political ideologies. Until recently, pro-American views dominated within the Korean political establishment. But, now, the advancement of the Internet led to the proliferation of a more neutral and realistic views.

Such political direction dominating the Internet today should not be categorized with the anti-systemic movement of the 1980s in Korea that was led by a group of social activists, mostly college students. Leaders of the anti-systemic movement of the 1980s sought to realize a fundamental revolution in politics. Many of them actually sought a socialist revolution based on Marxism, and some fought for the nationalist movement based on North

ROK Turning Point

Korea's ideology of *Juche*. These movements evoked emotional public response, as well.

However, what we see on the Internet today is the change of political direction towards a more neutralized and realistic path, not the struggle of anti-communist and revolutionary ideologies we witnessed during the 1980s. This essentially is what Mr. Roh Moo-hyun claimed and a majority of voters, sharing his view, chose Mr. Roh as their president in the 2002 presidential election.

As we witnessed during the course of the candlelit demonstrations in 2002, the demonstrators who tried to whip up the anti-American sentiment failed to receive warm response from the public. From the very beginning, the initial organizers of the candlelit demonstrations did not endorse the arguments advanced by the anti-American political forces. And, on the Internet, a heated debate continued over the meaning of the candlelit demonstrations, whether it was a memorial service for the accidental death of two Korean schoolgirls, whether it was an anti-American protest, or whether it was for the anti-war cause and for world peace. Many demonstrators responded that they were out there for the anti-war cause and for world peace, and they did not want to have anything to do with America-bashing. Some people regard this response as a prime example of the public turning away from the leftists' ideology.

New political ideas and methods shaped during the 2002 presidential election campaign will no doubt spread across every corner of Korean politics; but, it may take some time for them to take root.

The Korean economy has achieved rapid growth through industrialization and its position in the world economy has improved tremendously as a result. More and more, the public is aware of Korea's presence in the global community.

Globalization came to Korea in its full force. Hence, Korean voters began to scrutinize what politicians said and did in the international arena, to see whether they were fit to represent Korea. The public continues to demand a proper attitude and appropriate language from politicians, and such demands will no doubt appear on the Internet. The Internet will continuous to be used as a communications medium between the public and politicians in Korea.

Conclusion

The Internet played a number of important roles during the 2002 presidential election campaign in Korea. It was used as a tool for mass mobilization and political organization, as an instrument for shaping political discourse and setting the national agenda, as a mechanism of grass-roots public fund-raising, and as a virtual battlefield for competing political ideologies. The Internet proved to be a very effective and novel political weapon in the arsenal of various political forces vying for power in an open democratic system.

With the establishment of “participatory government,” the Roh Moo-hyun administration made a pledge for social reform. Many believe that the reform movement will not be limited to the government only; it will have an impact on every corner of the society.

Although Korea stepped back from the pro-democracy movement since the 1987 June Democratization Struggle, unable to properly reflect the public’s political demands for social and economic changes, recent political developments over the Internet appear to have reinvigorated public support for the reform movement on a nationwide scale. Therefore, it is every politician’s responsibility to continue the momentum started in the Internet and to extend the reformist ideas to every quarter of the Korean society.

ROK Turning Point

In the future, the Korea-U.S. bilateral relations will have to be reformed, too, in the spirit of cooperation, equality, and mutual prosperity. America bashing is not on the reformist agenda. Mr. Roh Moo-hyun's reformist government will exert every effort to curtail anti-American sentiments in Korea. No doubt, results will be fruitful and cooperative bilateral relations will be further enhanced. 