



Political Parties and Party Politics in Korea

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Political Parties and Party Politics in Korea

by Kim Kyōng-su

The four articles presented here, including this one by professor Kim who teaches political science at Sunggyungwan University in Seoul, are among the papers delivered to a symposium on political parties held recently under the sponsorship of the university's Social Science Research Institute.

The formation of political parties in developing countries is generally centered around a figurehead, a fact that inevitably gives rise to a lack of party policy and to party factionalism. Korea's political parties have been no exception to this trend.

The leaders of independence movements in post-World War II colonies took leading roles in the establishment of independent governments in their freed nations. Politics in newly-independent nations came under the influence of either the United States or the Soviet Union due to the fact the national independence was, in a sense, given by either of the two super powers. Korea's independence and the establishment of her government are typical examples in this respect.

Thus viewed, the conflict between the right and the left in the wake of Korea's 1945 liberation from Japanese colonialism was inevitable, and the establishment of the government of the Republic of Korea in the southern half of the Korean peninsula was a natural outcome. Since the leftists and the Communists made their exit from the power struggle to protest the elections and the establishment of a government in the southern half of the Korean peninsula, there could no further conflict between the political powers after the government of the Republic of Korea was established in August 1948. The situation was such that Syngman Rhee became the central figure of the government that was established and nobody dared challenge the authority he won for himself as an independence fighter.⁽¹⁾

Thus the establishment of the government of the Republic of Korea was proclaimed on August 15, 1948 and Syngman Rhee assumed the presidency. The one-man rule does not feel the need to organize a political party, but if and when an opposition party is formed to unseat

the ruler from office he is forced to organize a counterpart whether he likes it or not. Political parties emerged in Korea in just such a situation.

In the process of forming the government the late Kim Sōng-su became the focal point of popular aspirations but President Rhee appointed Yi Yun-yōng as the first prime minister for the alleged reason that the latter had the confidence of compatriots in the northern half of Korea. The National Assembly, however, voted down the nomination and instead approved Yi Pōm-sōk as the first prime minister. After the first cabinet was thus formed the Hanguk (Korea) Democratic Party (Hanmin-dang) found itself almost completely estranged (one post, that of minister of finance, only was allocated to the party) from the main current of events. Therefore it was quite natural that the Hanmin-dang, which played the leading role not only in anti-Communist struggles in the wake of the liberation but also in the formation of the government thus allowing Syngman Rhee to win the presidency, revolted against him.⁽²⁾

Drawing on the classic definition of Edmund Burke, a political party is the one which formulates policies conducive to safeguarding and promoting national interests and which endeavors to translate them into reality after assuming the helm of government power. However, the power contest between the Hanmin-dang and President Rhee did not originate from incompatibility of policies, since as conservative political forces they could not have different ideologies and policies, but from power struggles because the Hanmin-dang was left out of the picture. The political situation being

what it was, the political party degenerated into a mere instrument for conducting election campaigns and grabbing political power.⁽³⁾ The rivalry among the Minguk-dang (Democratic Nationalist Party), Daehan Kukmin-dang (Korea Nationalist Party), Minju-dang (Democratic Party), and Chayu-dang (Liberal Party) during the period following the establishment of the government was based on similar greed for power.

The political parties had nothing to differentiate one from another in respect to policy and they could not engage in naked power struggles. In real politics a party cannot but advance a body of ideological aims in order to attain political power. One such aim differentiating the government and the opposition parties under the Syngman Rhee regime was found in their different views concerning government structure. This difference, however, did not originate from ideologies and policy platforms but was simply a method of waging power struggles.

The Constitutional Assembly elected on May 10, 1948 adopted the cabinet-responsible system of government centering around a draft law prepared by Legislative Councillor Yu Chin-o but the Assembly's decision was abandoned overnight in favor of the President-responsible system of government due to strong opposition from the president of the Constitutional Assembly, Dr. Syngman Rhee, who was considered the only possible candidate for the position of President of the new Republic. Dr. Yu it seems, drafted the law concerning government organization on the basis of a cabinet-responsible system in light of his relations with the late Kim Sŏng-su of the Hanmin-dang. Even if the government had taken the form of a cabinet-responsible system, the Hanmin-dang would have had no other choice but to back Dr. Syngman Rhee as President while it could have held real power because Dr. Rhee's presidency would have been merely titular. Thus it can be assumed that Dr. Rhee naturally favored the form of government under which he would hold real power.

However, Dr. Yu's *Memoirs* concerning this period recall that Dr. Yu himself presented his draft Constitution to the Constitutional Draft Subcommittee of the Committee for the Compilation of Legal Codes, which was attached to the Ministry of Law of the Interim Government of Chosŏn established in June 1947. In his draft

Dr. Yu preferred the cabinet-responsible system of government over the President-responsible system because "if we adopt the latter form, political wrangling will stagnate the functions of the government."⁽⁵⁾ It was after that time that the Hanmin-dang commissioned Dr. Yu to draft a constitution. According to Dr. Yu's *Memoirs*, in March 1948 Kim Sŏng-su asked him to draft the constitution and upon hearing the gist of the draft he was compiling the latter agreed in principle to a bicameral system of government.⁽⁶⁾

Without recourse to Dr. Yu's *Memoirs* this writer has the following propositions that Dr. Yu originally drafted the constitution on the basis of a cabinet-responsible system in disregard of his relations with Hanmin-dang. First, the history of European politics after the French Revolution of 1787 shows that constitutions adopted in Europe, or the criterion of their democratic values, always corresponded to the British cabinet system; second, Dr. Yu as a professor lectured on the Weimar Constitution; and third, he was influenced by the Constitution of the Fourth Republic of France, i.e., French information officer of the United Nations Temporary Commission on Korea provided Dr. Yu with a photogravure of the French Constitution which was certainly not available in Korea.

Anyway, it is said that Dr. Rhee confided to the late Shin Ik-hi concerning the draft constitution that if the cabinet-responsible system was to be adopted the President would have little to do but it was inevitable he would have to accept such a system.⁽⁷⁾ When the draft was referred to the subcommittee concerned with its second reading, the subcommittee recommended the cabinet-responsible system be adopted despite the fact that Dr. Rhee aired his opposition to that form of government. However, the committee's decision was reversed overnight by Dr. Rhee with the consent of Kim Sŏng-su and the leaders of the Hanmin-dang. The intriguing question here is whether Dr. Rhee changed his reluctant acceptance of a cabinet-responsible system in favor of a powerful presidency or whether the Hanmin-dang, which was then powerful enough to enforce a cabinet-responsible system of government, gave in to Dr. Rhee.

Dr. Yu said in his *Memoirs* that he did not know why Dr. Rhee, after agreeing to his draft proposal, aboutfaced so abruptly.⁽⁸⁾ Dr. Rhee agreed to the draft proposal "in spite of himself" although his life and experience in

the United States and above all his propensity for power instinctively inclined him to favor the powerful Presidential system.

This writer is of the opinion that the then U.S. Military Government and Dr. Rhee's American advisors came out in support of Dr. Rhee's position concerning the form the government should take. The U.S. military authorities were convinced of the desirability of the Presidential system of government for the new Republic of Korea.⁽⁹⁾ On the other hand, Dr. Yu, who consistently adhered to his original proposition that the cabinet system would be most suitable to Korean reality, undertook to persuade Dr. Noble, an American advisor to Dr. Rhee at that time even though the subcommittee decision favoring the cabinet system was reversed to the Presidential system. Dr. Yu sought Dr. Noble's understanding on the issue of the National Assembly's right to approve the nomination of a prime minister and the prime minister's right to appoint his own cabinet. It was reported that Dr. Noble merely asked, "Haven't they adopted the Presidential system yet?" But then, it is also said, he agreed to Dr. Yu's proposal. The next day Dr. Yu called on Dr. Rhee and told the latter that he and Dr. Noble had reached agreement on the issue. Dr. Rhee hesitated for a while and then agreed to Dr. Yu's proposal "sooner than I expected."⁽¹⁰⁾ This writer is of the opinion that some political consideration was behind this change of attitude regarding the form of government.

Then why did the Hanmin-dang follow Dr. Rhee's change of attitude without demur?

As briefly stated above, when the subcommittee adopted the cabinet-responsible system despite Dr. Rhee's opposition, he nevertheless held fast to his position saying that he would launch a mass movement and resign his office. On this Kim Sŏng-su and other leaders of Hanmin-dang immediately called on Dr. Yu and said that there was no alternative but to adopt the Presidential system since Dr. Rhee, the only available candidate for that office, had come in opposition to the cabinet-responsible system of government.⁽¹¹⁾ That the Hanmin-dang which was certainly powerful enough to push through its bill for the cabinet system gave in to Dr. Rhee's strong opposition indicates that under the given circumstances of the time even the powerful Hanmin-dang felt itself unable to maintain control over the organization of government and over political power without the support of Dr. Rhee.

It was also because of this [that when Dr. Rhee snubbed the Hanmin-dang in his distribution of political spoils, more vehement was the Hanmin-dang's opposition to Dr. Rhee. Thus it can be seen that the Hanmin-dang's strong support for the cabinet-responsible system was based on that party's view that the system was a means of access to political power and that it was not merely a political platform.

Few remember how the platforms of the Liberal and Democratic parties concretely differed. If there were any differences they were at most marginal since both parties were rooted in conservatism. One thing, however, that distinguished one from the other was their views concerning the form of government, the Democratic Party calling for the cabinet-responsible system from time the Republic was established. This, however, was simply a weapon with which to wage power struggles as can be seen from the following events. In the May 1956 Presidential election, Dr. Rhee was elected President and Dr. Chang Myŏn (John M. Chang) of the opposition party was elected Vice President. The then ruling Liberal Party, which controlled the Assembly, proposed a constitutional amendment for a change to the cabinet-responsible system so as to prevent the chief executive from becoming the target of a possible National Assembly vote of non-confidence. This move was ultimately motivated by fear on the part of the Liberal Party that the Democratic Party should take over the government if and when President Rhee should die. Therefore, the Democratic Party, which had campaigned for a cabinet-responsible system, came out in opposition to the Liberal move calling for the constitutional amendment.

The Democratic Party again advocated, following the April 19, 1960 Student Uprising, the cabinet-responsible system of government not as its own particular policy platform but as a strategic means of countering the Rhee regime. In early May 1960, when the constitutional subcommittee was preparing a draft bill concerning the cabinet-responsible system of government, "staff members of the new faction of the Democratic Party took a positive attitude toward the constitutional amendment," while the backbone of the new faction asserted that, "in order to check the arbitrary exercise of power by the prime minister, which is liable

to occur under the cabinet system, a balance of power between the President and the prime minister must be achieved.”⁽¹²⁾

Even key members of the Democratic Party were of the opinion that the new Constitution should be legislated by the new National Assembly, apparently on the premise that the new National Assembly could not push through the required constitutional amendment. Representative Lee Ch'öl-süng aired the opinion that since the spirit of the April Student Uprising was a call for the reelection of a President and a Vice President, they must be elected by popular vote. The reason why some members of the Democratic Party joined forces in opposition to the constitutional amendment was considered to be that “their ultimate political aim was to enable their faction to seize government power by electing the President and the Vice President by popular vote under the current Constitution.”⁽¹³⁾ Not only that, Dr. Chang himself reportedly tried his best to cope with the situation without recourse to a constitutional amendment calling for a cabinet-responsible system.

However, since the Democratic Party had maintained as its policy for more a decade that the cabinet-responsible system was the panacea for Korea's political troubles, the state of affairs in the wake of the April Student Uprising was such that even day laborers and daily wage earners pinned their hope on the cabinet-responsible system of government. Under the circumstances, opponents of the constitutional amendment could not but be branded as heretics and traitors. Therefore, whether they were willing or not, whether they were right or wrong, they had to cross the bridge and call for a constitutional amendment for a change to a cabinet-responsible system of government. Of course, at the time there were no prospects that the cabinet system would function smoothly and so no one took the problem seriously. Although the people were ignorant of the various forms of government, the constitution and politics at the time the new constitution was adopted by the Constitutional Assembly,⁽¹⁴⁾ no attempt, it seems, was made to rectify the situation following the April 1960 Student Uprising. Even though the Democratic Party steadfastly and strategically advocated the cabinet-responsible system of government, it appears the Democrats never tried to negotiate with the aim of stabilizing power upon which it could conduct national affairs on the basis of the cabinet-responsible system of govern-

ment.⁽¹⁵⁾ The Democratic government increased the number of cabinet posts by appointing a parliamentary vice minister to each ministry but it failed to work out a system to stabilize power due to increasing opposition from the old faction of the party. The Democratic government was soon toppled, however, by the Military Revolution of May 16, 1961. Although the Democratic Party seems to have distinguished itself from the Liberal Party by its advocacy of a cabinet-responsible system of government, in reality this advocacy was merely a means of waging a power struggle which ultimately proved to be the downfall of the party itself.

Political parties in Korea did not take the proper road to power by winning public support in a contest of policies but merely indulged themselves, as stated above, in naked power struggle. In addition, political parties were formed centering around a figurehead and the political elimination of the figurehead of a rival party was considered the shortcut to government power. Thus political purges, the libel of political rivals, terrorism by political hoodlums and the forgery of public opinion by the government became the order of the times.

Since political parties seize government power only through elections, victory in elections is paramount. If there are no legal and moral restraints the political parties concerned will surely conspire to win victory by all means, fair or foul. Elections were, however, rigged and corruption became rampant in such subtle ways that all restraints were sidetracked. It is unnecessary to list the actual ways and means adopted in such election rigging and corruption.

The minor electoral district system, which the new republic adopted, was politically doomed from the outset. The new constitution, which adopted a progressive attitude in stipulating the economic policies of the new republic, might well have been expected to take the more advanced system of major electoral districts rather than the older system of minor districts. However, one of the reasons why this latter system was adopted may have been the confrontation between the rightists and leftists following the 1945 liberation, because the minor electoral district system was considered more effective for checking the outlawed leftists in their efforts to be elected to the National Assembly. On the other hand, this minor

electoral district system opened the real possibility of the government meddling in elections. Thus, government intervention in elections started with representative government in Korea.

Even though political parties do not vie with one another on the basis of policy, the voters always determine the winner in an election, i.e., when the voters decide it is time for a change in government they vote for the opposition and when they decide the ruling party is doing a good job they vote for the government party.⁽¹⁶⁾ Thus, the opposition in past Korean elections did not feel the need to explain, in any detail, the differences in its own policies from those of the ruling party. Such election slogans as "Change the Government for a Better Life" were sufficient to contest the ruling party in an election. In relation to party politics, an election has meaning only when it measures public support for a party's policy platform, but in Korea an election often afforded opportunity for the voters to give vent to their complaints against the ruling party, as was seen from the fact that 20 percent of the voters cast their ballot for Democratic Presidential Candidate Shin Ik-hi in the 1956 elections even though they well knew that their votes for the deceased candidate were void.

The 1956 Presidential elections were very significant in that they demonstrated the degree of rapprochement between the opposition party and the people on the one hand, while it heightened the sense of opposition to the ruling party on the other. However, when the ruling party feels the mounting impact of the opposition party the government inevitably feels the need to intervene in the conduct of elections. The rigging of the March 15, 1960 Presidential elections originated from such a situation.

As seen above, political parties in Korea commenced with the schemes of Dr. Syngman Rhee in his pursuit of personal power. Thus those who received favors from him rallied around him to form the ruling party, while those who were no longer favored by him rallied around a figurehead to establish the opposition party with the aim of forming the future government. Korean political parties were centered more around a figurehead than political ideologies or policies as can be seen from the fact that most opposition leaders before the 1961 Military Revolution at one time or another

served in important government posts under the Rhee regime. Tenacious adherence to political power made a man leave or join a party according to the dictates of his own personal interests. In this way a political party, gathering together around a potentate aimed at future government power, gave birth to factions. Then the factions split from the mother party not because of political differences.

Thus Korean political parties were not urgently required to formulate a well-thought-out policy platform which is the proper function of a political party. Of course we cannot conceive a political party without a policy platform. But Korean political parties did not formulate feasible policies under fixed political ideals but such policies that would merely make everybody happy. They promised farmers they would raise the price of farm products while at the same time they advocated low price policies before urban laborers. Their pledges indeed covered the whole strata in society, ranging from the millionaire down to the poor farmer. Political parties in Korea, a nation which does not permit progressive political parties, expect support from all strata of society because none of them can hope to have connections with all the privileged classes.⁽¹⁷⁾ Accordingly, election pledges of each party are a marshalling of all sorts of flowery words which could never constitute a blueprint for tomorrow but only a mere document for an election campaign.⁽¹⁸⁾ That political parties could be formed centering around a figurehead, without a fixed political ideology or policy platform, often gave rise to the desertion of its members from a political party and the rise and fall of innumerable political parties during the past two decades.

The existence of political parties does not necessarily mean the existence of party politics. If political parties exist as exclusively election-oriented organizations, they cannot constitute party politics. Therefore, party politics must be grasped in terms of the function of political parties to organize and direct public opinion. Therefore, the ruling party can best reflect public opinion when and if it maintains a liberal distance from the administrative organs.⁽¹⁹⁾ Even the Liberal Party could not function properly as a good ruling party. Hence the fall of its supreme ruler was immediately followed by its own disintegration.

Since Korean political parties aimed at the seizure of government power by all means, they have been very apt to define an opposition party as reactionary. If the government party assumes such an attitude toward an opposition party, then party politics is anything but properly managed.

Opposition parties in Korea were formed, as explained above, by those who were denied Dr. Rhee's favor and not on the basis of a consensus of political ideologies or policies. Opposition parties were launched with a view to grabbing government power and therefore their energy was directed more toward hatred of their opponents, who had the same objective of grasping government power, rather than toward contention on the basis of different policies.⁽²⁰⁾ The hatred directed by opposition parties toward the ruling party is transfused into the complaints of grassroot voters to form a grand alliance of opposition parties at election times. The merger of political parties, of course, premises the compromise of different policies between or among parties. However, Korean political parties, which are not organized around a consensus of political ideologies, appear to gloss over contradictions and policy differences in the face of the immediate gains at the time of an election.⁽²¹⁾

Particularly in Korea where the government power is paramount among all values, the transfer of government power is a matter of life and death. Thus the desperate struggle for government power between the opposition and the ruling parties leaves no room for compromise and is a repetition of unrestrained head-on collisions. Under such circumstances in which there is the fear of political retaliation, the peaceful transfer of government power is hard to expect and the transfer takes the form of a succession of the ruler by his hand-picked lieutenant, as President Rhee appointed the late Lee Ki-bung. If the confrontation between the ruling and opposition parties runs to extremes, political stability cannot be expected. In a situation in which there is no consensus whatsoever between the ruling and opposition parties, there might be formal but certainly not actual political stability.⁽²²⁾ The political situation under the Third Republic in Korea is an example of such a case.

We have considered the physiology and pathology of political parties and party politics in Korea. A more detailed diagnosis and

subsequent prescription will be extensively discussed in this symposium and so what follows are the writer's personal views.

Political parties are organizations of men and so the reformation of parties connotes a change in the personnel of parties. Honest men like to remain apart from a party.⁽²³⁾ It is a fact that able men have remained aloof from political parties, and now is the time to pave the way for the participation of such able men in politics. The reformation of political parties also means the fading away of those professional politicians who busied themselves forming political parties around a figurehead which were, in reality, nothing but organizations for election campaigning.

The organization of political parties must also be remodeled functionally. This remodeling will put an end to mere power struggle and turn parties to organizing and leading public opinion and to paving the way for contests of policies. The contest of policies will call forth the need for dialogue between the ruling and opposition parties, and in the course of such dialogue the government's manipulation of public opinion and election rigging will cease because election results will determine the winner in the contest of policies. It will also be possible to explore support through fair elections.

One more important thing is the promotion of industrial development, because industrial modernization in a sense is equated with political modernization. If men of ability are able to make inroads to the industrial field political power struggle will ease so much the more. If the above becomes the case in Korean politics, the old adage that "culture and property" will be gained by occupying the seat of power will lose meaning and men of culture and property will find their way into politics, thus paving the way to make the Korean political climate suitable for democracy.

Foot Notes

- (1) The north Korean Communist regime also took the same course in having Kim Il-sŏng as its chief of state.
- (2) Dr. Rhee appears to have shirked the domestic organization and its influence over the Hanmin-dang.
- (3) M. Duverger, *Political Parties*, translated by Barbara and R. North, 1959, p. 366
- (4) H.D. Lasswell and A. Kaplan, *Power and*
(Continued on Page 21)

representing a cross section of the population.

Q. It is said that a trend to mutual distrust is prevalent among the Korean people. What do you consider the reason for this?

A-1. The habit of factional strife is still extant as in the old days. (24 percent)

A-2. Political leaders are not frank enough to reveal to the people what they are doing. They merely conceal everything. (12.7 percent)

A-3. The people have learned through experience that they have too often been deceived by those whom they had trusted. (14.8 percent)

A-4. The most basic cause is that the Korean people are poor and find it very difficult to earn a livelihood. (37.8 percent)

A-5. They think that they can believe no one except themselves. (7.6 percent)

A-6. Other answers. (3 percent)

As the survey reveals, the highest percentage is recorded in Answer 4 in which economic poverty is raised as the cause. The second is Answer 1 pointing out traditional factional habits. Answers 3 and 5 which mention man's egoistic nature, can also be considered a warning against the propensity to factionalism. If this is correct, then the conclusion is that 46 percent of those interviewed affirm the factional nature of the Korean people (Answers 1,3, and 5). Answers 2 and 4 can be regarded as institutional reasons. In short, the survey shows that institutional demerits and human nature constitute important factors in the rise of factions.

The elimination of factions and factionalism in political parties can be achieved by modernizing party organization and reforming the human nature of politicians. The modernization of party organization, as pointed out above, can be realized by:

1. A reformation of parties so that they can be led by sound ideology;

2. Establishment of a pyramidal, popular organization;

3. Eradication of the boss-centered system;

4. Formalization of political fund raising;

5. Collaboration with pressure groups; and

6. Giving up dependence on foreign force.

For the reformation of the human nature of politicians, the following measures would be efficacious.

1. Elimination of egoistic modes of thinking;

2. Cultivation of a free spirit;

3. Promotion of mutual understanding;

4. Rejection of favoritism;

5. Restraint on excessive lust for power; and

6. Spread of social education to inculcate loyalty to principles and rules.

Once party organization is revamped into an order dedicated to the reformation of human nature by achieving the above goals, factionalism will be eradicated and a bright future will loom for the modernization of Korean political parties.

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Society, translated by Kim Ha-yong, p. 119.

(5) Yu Chin-o, *Memoirs*, July issue of *Pöbjöng*, pp. 59-60

(6) *Ibid*, April 1966 issue of *Pöbjöng*, p. 80

(7) *Ibid*, August 1966 issue of *Pöbjöng*, p. 58

(8) *Ibid*, p. 59

(9) K. Loewenstein, *Political Power and Governmental Process*, 1957, p. 67

(10) Yu Chin-o, *ibid*, October 1966 issue of *Pöbjöng*, pp. 63-64

(11) Yu Chin-o, *ibid*, September 1966 issue of *Pöbjöng*, p. 60

(12) *The Chosön Ilbo*, May 8, 1960

(13) *The Tonga Ilbo*, June 14, 1960

(14) Yu Chin-o, *ibid*, April 1966 issue of *Pöbjöng*, p. 79

(15) According to K.S. Smellie (*The British Way of Life*, 1955, p. 127), about 100 administrative posts are filled by British members of Parliament.

(16) Lasswell and Kaplan, *ibid*, p. 240

(17) Robert Michels, *Political Parties*, p. 19

(18) V.U. Key, *Political Parties and Pressure Groups*, 1958, p. 461

(19) Kioaki Tsuji, *Seiji-o-Kangaeru-jihyo*, Iwanami Shinsho, 1960, p. 76

(20) The same as (17), p. 392

(21) The same as (18), p. 460

(22) The same as (19), p. 84

(23) Robert Michels, *The First Lectures in Political Sociology*, ed. by Alfred de Grazia, translated by Yi Sang-baek, 179