FISSION, FUSION, REFORM AND FAILURE IN SOUTH KOREAN POLITICS: ROH MOO-HYUN'S ADMINISTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the origins, dynamics and decline of the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-08). Since the democratisation of politics two decades ago, a distinctive political style has developed in South Korea, marked by weak institutionalisation of political parties with splits and mergers between parties, strong patterns of regional voting, and an electoral system that has often pitted a president against parliament. President Roh Moo-hyun started from a position of apparent strength, having, unusually, achieved a majority in the general election of 2004. His attempts to use this position to initiate reforms in four sensitive areas roused strong resistance, his Uri Party lost its majority through by-elections within a year and finally broke apart through defections. Roh sought to draw in the opposition with a proposal for a grand coalition, but was again rebuffed, as were his attempts to effect further changes to the electoral system. His preoccupations did not please the electorate, who rejected his party and his policies in the 2007 presidential election.

1 INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, democratic politics in South Korea have been accompanied by two salient political issues: the continuous fission and fusion of political parties, and regionalism. The process of fission and fusion, seemingly unstoppable, was by and large justified by the prevailing administration (which orchestrated them) as a measure necessary to ensure the country's governability by enabling the government to attain a majority status in parliament. Party merger and switching have been the most commonly practiced tools to achieve such a goal. This important 'feature' of politics in the Republic of

Korea (ROK—South Korea) came to dominate and eventually disrupt even the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-08).

The political life of the Roh administration was tumultuous. The lowest ebb was reached with the impeachment of the president on 12 March 2004. Outraged by the behaviour of the political class, voters gave the ruling and pro-presidential Uri Party a majority of votes in the general elections of 2004. For the first time in Korea's post-democratisation history, a party was voted into power without the necessity of building coalitions with other political parties. On paper this boded well for Korea's stability and governability. The ruling Uri Party was expected to encounter a less insurmountable opposition in its attempts to pass new laws in the legislature and thus implement the reform agenda it had advocated in the electoral campaign. Instead, Roh and the Uri Party, like all previous governments, had to deal with a strong opposition unwilling to negotiate on controversial issues. The party's majority did not last long enough to secure the approval of any such laws. Disappointment over the party's failure to implement its reform agenda lead to its defeat in the by-elections of April and October 2005. The Uri Party lost its majority in the National Assembly with 144 seats out of a total of 299 seats, down from an earlier 152 seats. An unstoppable process of defection and fragmentation brought the party to its demise before the rounds of December 2007 (presidential) and April 2008 (parliamentary) elections.

In discussing the decline of the Roh administration, this paper pays special attention to the continuous party mergers and splits (in which regional patterns of voting behaviour, although less pronounced than in the past, continued to play a part), to the presidential impeachment and to the virtual implosion of the ruling party. It shows that just like its predecessors, the ruling administration was primarily concerned, in fact obsessed, with achieving a majority status in the legislature. This was perceived, as I have noted elsewhere (Kim Youngmi 2008), as the key to the solution of problems of governability in the country.[1] The

[1] This seems to be in line with the findings of classical coalition research. Minimum winning coalition theories traditionally hold that majority status provides more cabinet stability, especially with a single majority party, in parliamentary systems because majority status can survive confidence votes (Laver and Schofield 1990; Budge and Keman 1990). At the same time, research conducted in very different geographic and cultural settings (Europe) but experiencing analogous political issues (lack of a clear majority in parliament) shows that bare majority or minority status do not necessarily cause political deadlock in the legislature (Strøm 1990; Strøm and Müller 2001; Cheibub 2002; Pech 2004).

Uri Party lost its majority status within a year. Political conflicts within the party and with the opposition brought the country to a standstill. As a way out of the deadlock, President Roh Moo-hyun proposed that the government and opposition should form a 'grand coalition' in order to implement major structural reforms, including amending electoral laws and in the end the constitution as well.[2]

This paper seeks to address two issues: firstly, why the Roh Moo-hyun administration failed in implementing reform laws despite the fact that the ruling Uri Party counted on a majority of seats in the legislature; and secondly, why the president's proposal of a grand coalition met with such fierce opposition from both the ruling and the opposition parties. It shows that the critical factor undermining governability during the Roh Moo-hyun administration was not the lack of a clear majority in parliament, since the 2004 elections actually granted the ruling Uri Party a majority of seats, but rather the low level of institutionalisation of political parties and of the party system, and the administration's failure to connect with ordinary citizens. It was these failings, compounded by an electoral system that often ended up setting the incumbent president against parliament, the paper argues, that prevented Roh's administration from implementing its programme of proposed reforms

The paper is divided into three sections. I start with a brief review of coalition politics in the post-democratisation period in South Korea, which will aim to place the conflict between government and opposition and the Roh Moo-hyun administration's attempt to attain a majority status in the legislature in historical context. Next I look at four major reform initiatives requiring legislation (abolition of the National Security Laws, the Truth and Reconciliation Laws or Laws to Clear Past History, the Media Reform Laws and the Private School Laws) to illustrate the difficulties encountered by the Roh Moo-hyun administration and the ruling Uri Party in the legislature. I then turn my attention to the president's proposal to form a grand coalition to overcome institutional constrains. Final remarks conclude.

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[2] The constitution of the ROK stipulates that the president is elected for one term only for a total of five years. General elections are often held in the middle of a presidential term, with the consequence that the ruling party finds itself without a majority in parliament, where instead the opposition party/parties dominate (Kim Yongho 2001; Kang 2005; Kim Youngmi 2008). Several scholars have identified in the differing duration of the term for president and the duration of the legislature one of the most critical factors creating problems in new democracies (Mainwaring and Scully 1995; Tsebelis 2002; Figueiredo and Limongi 2000).

2 KOREAN POLITICS AFTER DEMOCRATISATION

While reviewing the process of party merger and split in the period following democratisation, this section also highlights the political prominence of regionalism in Korea. The politics of coalition and party mergers are deeply intertwined with regionalism and the two phenomena have become profoundly entrenched in Korean political life over the past two decades. Both are important for understanding the challenges faced by the Roh Moo-hyun administration.

2.1 *Fission and fusion among political parties*

Many parties have emerged and faded in South Korea since the demise of authoritarian rule. Even party names have frequently changed. Politicians have been engaged in continuous party switching, eventually gaining the nickname of 'migrant bird politicians'. Party mergers and break-ups have become a tool to win elections and achieve majority status in the legislature.

Nevertheless, Korean politics is not the formless entity that the picture above at first suggests. The three main political groupings can be closely identified with the 'three Kims' (Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil), the leaders who have played a prominent role in the country's politics since the 1960s. This is often referred to as the 'Three Kims' era' (Im 2004). Each leader is associated with a particular region (Kim Young-sam with Kyŏngsang in the southeast, Kim Dae-jung with Chŏlla in the southwest, Kim Jong-pil with the central region of Ch'ungch'ŏng), each region providing loyal support to the leader during the various electoral campaigns. It was not a time, as Lee Gap-yun (1998: 4) notes, when the party system was able to develop, as personalised factions rather than parties grew in importance. During the three Kims' era, party members joined and left political parties following their respective party leaders' decisions.

An example of the process of fission and fusion is provided by the experience of the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), formed in 1999 by Kim Dae-jung. The MDP underwent serious internal conflicts among a number of factions in the latter years of the Kim Dae-jung administration and the early years of Roh Moo-hyun's presidency. Roh had won a primary election before the presidential election in 2002 with the support of a small faction from among those who went

on to make him president.[3] Forty members who supported Roh Moo-hyun defected from the MDP, and, in coalition with five members from the Grand National Party, and two members, (including Kim Won-ung), from the People's Party for Reform, created the Uri Party on 11 November 2003. The following year, Roh Moo-hyun was impeached by the opposition parties which included the MDP, alongside the GNP and the United Liberal Democrats. President Roh was accused of violating electoral laws by supporting a particular party, the Uri Party, during the electoral campaign. The opposition demanded that the president be impeached. The bid was passed with a large majority in the legislature, while Uri Party members physically struggled to stop the impeachment in the National Assembly on 12 March 2004. Clashes between legislators in the National Assembly were broadcast live. President Roh Moo-hyun was then temporarily removed from office. This situation lasted until the impeachment was overturned by the Constitutional Court on 14 May 2004, which deemed it unconstitutional. The impeachment was clearly by far the toughest attack the opposition had ever launched on a ruling administration in post-democratisation Korea. At the general election in April that year the voters granted the Uri Party, backed by Roh, the majority of seats in the legislature. The Uri Party's majority status owed much to voters who resented the presidential impeachment.

2.2 *Regionalism*

Electorally, South Korea appears divided into three main regions: the southeast, the southwest and the centre. Already in the 13th presidential election held in 1987, which was won by Roh Tae-woo, strong patterns of voting along regional lines were clear outside of Kyŏnggi province (where Seoul is located). In 1990, President Roh Tae-woo from the then Democratic Justice Party built a coalition to overcome the large opposition in the legislature by merging parties with Kim Jong-pil's New Democratic Republican Party and Kim Young-sam's

[3] Roh Moo-hyun was able to rely on strong non-party support in society. This was well illustrated by the emergence of 'Rohsamo' (盧思募Society of people who love Roh Moo-hyun), resembling a kind of fan club, which effectively mobilised support for Roh during the electoral campaign and played a crucial role in his election. The MDP members who later defected and established the Uri Party were also members of Rohsamo.

Unification Democratic Party. The resulting Democratic Liberal Party (later renamed the Grand National Party (GNP)) left Kim Dae-jung, his party, the Peace Democratic Party, and the Chŏlla provinces where the party was primarily based, marginalised. Since 1990 the party system has developed around a split between the Chŏlla provinces, known as the Honam region, and the non-Honam region representing the Ch'ungch'ŏng and Kyŏngsang provinces (the last two known also as Yŏngnam). The three parties forming the coalition later renamed themselves as the Democratic Liberal Party and in February 1990 nominated Kim Young-sam as presidential candidate for the then approaching elections. The politics of coalition-building were successful and led to victory for Kim Young-sam, who in 1992 became the first elected president not belonging to the military establishment since 1961.

The second coalition was built in the run-up to the 1997 presidential elections between Kim Jong-pil from the United Liberal Democrats (ULD) and Kim Dae-jung from the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP). Voters from the Yŏngnam region felt marginalised as a result of this move, and strongly supported the GNP's Lee Hoi-chang.This coalition created a different party configuration in the following general elections: a non-Yŏngnam bloc, made up of Honam and the Ch'ungch'ŏng provinces, versus the Yŏngnam region. (See Table 1 for an indication of regional voting preferences in the 13th to 16th presidential elections.)

In the 15th presidential election (1997), Kim Dae-jung won office with 39.65 percent of the total votes, a margin of only 1.5 percent over the opposition leader Lee Hoi-chang, who gained 38.15 percent. The election results showed evidence of a strong regional cleavage, with Kim Dae-jung receiving 96.3 percent of votes in Kwangju, the capital of South Chŏlla province, and over 90 percent in South and North Chŏlla provinces. Lee Hoi-chang, on the other hand, gained 71.6 percent in Taegu, the capital of North Kyŏngsang province, 60.55 percent in North Kyŏngsang province and 52.6 percent in Pusan (*Munhwa Ilbo,* 19 December 1997; *Seoul Economy*, 20 December 1997; National Election Commission[4]). Two years into the Kim Dae-jung presidency, the results of the 16th general election (2000) showed that these regional differences continued to prevail. Despite the ruling

[4] Percentages are taken from National Election Commission data.

Table 1 Electoral votes in the 13th to 16th presidential elections

Presidential election	Presidential candidates	Province							Total
		Kyŏng-gi	Ch'ung-ch'ŏng	Chŏlla	North Kyŏng-sang	South Kyŏng-sang	Kang-won	Cheju	
13th 1987	Roh Tae-woo	34.4	33.1	9.9	68.1	36.6	59.3	49.8	38.6
	Kim Young-sam	28.7	20.1	1.2	26.6	53.7	26.1	26.8	28.0
	Kim Dae-jung	28.4	8.9	88.4	2.5	6.9	8.8	18.6	27.1
	Kim Jong-pil	8.4	34.6	0.5	2.4	2.6	5.4	4.5	8.1
14th 1992	Kim Young-sam	36.0	36.2	4.2	61.6	72.1	40.8	15.2	42.0
	Kim Dae-jung	34.8	27.3	91.0	8.7	10.8	15.2	32.9	33.8
	Chung Ju-young	19.8	23.8	2.3	17.0	8.8	33.5	15.4	16.3
15th 1997	Lee Hoi-chang	37.8	25.7	3.2	65.7	53	42.4	35.9	38.15
	Kim Dae-jung	41.4	43	93	12.9	13.4	23.3	39.8	39.65
	Lee In-je	18	26.1	1.5	17.4	29.5	30.4	20.7	18.91
16th 2002	Lee Hoi-chang	52	41.3	4.8	75.7	62.4	52.5	40	46.6
	Roh Moo-hyun	50.6	52.6	93.4	20.2	30.76	41.5	56.1	48.9
	Kwon Young-kil	2.6	5.2	1.2	3.8	5.2	5.1	3.3	3.9

Source: Author, from the National Election Commission, available at http://www.nec.go.kr/sinfo/index.html (accessed 17 September 2005).

coalition parties' effort to maximise the number of seats in the legislature through the political reorganisation[5] of the party system, the opposition GNP won 133 out of 273 total seats in the legislature. The MDP gained 115 seats including proportional representation seats and the ULD won a total of 17 seats (*Seoul Shinmun,* 15 April 2000). The GNP gained 39 percent of the total votes, the MDP 35.9 percent and the ULD 9.8 percent. Regional patterns of voting were clear here. The GNP gained 62.5 percent of the votes from the Yŏngnam region, the MDP gained 66.8 percent from the Honam region, and the ULD received 34.8 percent from the Ch'ungch'ŏng region.

After Roh Moo-hyun's victory in the 2002 presidential elections, 40 members defected from the MDP and founded the Uri Party in 2003. Honam voters split their preferences between the MDP and the

[5] To avoid deadlock, the Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003) attracted large numbers of defectors from opposition parties. The coalition ruling parties (the NCNP and the ULD) started with 120 seats facing large opposition in February 1998, but after the political reorganisation these parties, by dint of attracting many defectors, in May 1999 had 159 seats out of a total of 293 seats in the legislature

Uri Party and this resulted in a mitigation of the regional cleavage in the 2004 general elections. However, the GNP still received the highest number of votes (50.7 percent) in the Yŏngnam region and the Uri Party 55.2 percent in the Honam region. The decreased influence of strong regional leaders such as Kim Dae-jung and Kim Jong-pil was making itself felt. The ULD only received 14.8 percent in the Ch'ungch'ŏng region, an area traditionally loyal to the ULD under Kim Jong-pil, and the traditionally conservative voters in Ch'ungch'ŏng instead turned to the GNP, giving it the highest rate (25.2 percent) of votes in the region. Thus, outside of the Honam and Yŏngnam regions, the general elections in 2004 show a relative decline in the impact of regional differences. An important development was the emergence of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) as the country's third largest party. The DLP has benefited from the new electoral voting system (supplementary member system or mixed voting system),[6] introduced on 9 March 2004[7] which has allowed a small party such as this to survive in the legislature. The new voting system allows for seat allocation (56 seats out of 299) based on proportional representation.

2.3 *Effects of the post-democratisation political system*

First, the fission and fusion of political parties became a fundamental strategy to win presidential elections; second, voting behaviour produced no single majority party, but instead spread preferences along regional lines, where the local leader received the largest share of the votes. What made things more complicated was that general elections, coming after presidential ones, produced electoral results at variance with those of presidential elections, typically with the opposition emerging as winner. This institutional set-up provided a clear structural disadvantage to the government in a semi-presidential system where the ruling administration faced a large opposition in the legislature. In order to overcome this situation, the ruling parties sought to

[6] The supplementary member system is a variety of the parallel voting system, which combines plurality voting (also known as single-past-the-post) and proportional representation (party list).

[7] On 19 July 2001 during the Kim Dae-jung administration, the Constitutional Court ruled that the old Single-Seat Districts System was unconstitutional as it restricted voters' rights over choices of party preferences.

gain a majority status in parliament through attracting defectors from other parties.

A salient issue emerging from the evidence of regionalism is how this demonstrates a low level of institutionalisation in the party system as a whole. Randall and Svåsand (2002: 8-9) point out that if a single party is identified with certain groups, this undermines the level of institutionalisation of the party system.[8] The Korean case shows that each party has been strongly identified with a leader and the region where he or she is from. When a party monopolises a region, this undermines fair competition in an election in the region.

What marks the Roh Moo-hyun administration is that during this period, regionalism was less strong than in previous elections. (Roh's political career itself proved that he had challenged regionalism when, in the 2000 general election, he became a candidate for the MDP in Pusan, where his party was expected to have no loyal support base. He failed to be elected.) Furthermore, the pattern of success for one party in presidential elections followed by its defeat in parliamentary ones was broken during his administration. In 2004, the ruling Uri Party received 152 out of 299 total seats in the legislature. Given that ruling parties in Korea have traditionally sought to achieve majority status through all available means, this seemed to be a particularly welcome outcome. On paper, governability seemed to be ensured.

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[8] Panebianco (1988: 53) defines the institutionalisation of a political organisation as 'the process by which [an organization] incorporates its founders' values and aims'. According to Panebianco, the institutionalisation of political parties can be measured as follows: (1) by the organisation's degree of autonomy toward its environment; (2) and by its degree of 'systemness' (the 'internal structural coherence of the organization', ibid.: 56). Party system institutionalisation is instead understood by reference to four dimensions (Mainwaring 1998: 69): stability in patterns of inter-party competition, party roots in society, legitimacy of parties and elections, and party organisation. Randall and Svåsand (2002) argue that individual party institutionalisation is not always compatible with the institutionalisation of the party system and maintain (p. 6) that the two concepts (party, and party system institutionalisation) are to be kept distinct. This is because of the possible incompatibility arising in two key respects: first, the evenness of party institutionalisation and its identification with an exclusive ethnic or cultural grouping (ibid.: 8-9). By evenness, Randall and Svåsand mean the extent to which the level of political party institutionalisation is relatively uniform across the party system. A second issue concerns the party's identification with certain groups; if a party has absolute support from certain groups (e.g. religious, ethnic) there would be no fair competition between parties but a monopoly of support of one over the entire group. When a party monopolises strong support form a certain group or a region (in the case of South Korea) this may show a high level of institutionalisation of a party but low institutionalisation of the party system.

Reality turned out to be less favorable to the ruling party. Why this was the case and what turned electoral success into political failure in less than a year from the elections is the subject of the next section.

3 ORIGINS OF FAILURE

Roh Moo-hyun's position was vindicated in the April 2004 elections. With impeachment behind him, the president received strong backing from the citizenry, who showed overwhelming support for the pro-presidential Uri Party. The newly elected National Assembly was in fact new in many respects. Two-thirds of the legislators were first-time Assemblymen and women; 13 percent of legislators were female; and finally, the emergence of progressive members from the DLP was expected to bring some form of policy competition between the parties (Lee Tae-ho 2006).

3.1 *Four reform legislative initiatives*

On a wave of enthusiasm, the Uri Party set out to implement 'the four reform laws'.[9] The main legislative initiatives included the abolition of the National Security Laws, the introduction of the Truth and Reconciliation Laws, the Media Reform Laws and the Private School Laws.

The National Security Laws (and their amendment) had already been the subject of heated controversy during the Kim Dae-jung administration of 1998 to 2003. Under earlier authoritarian governments, the National Security Laws had been used to oppress government opponents or political dissidents through jail sentences or execution. Even the former president Kim Dae-jung was once sentenced to death in 1980 on charges of treason under these laws following Chun Doo-hwan's military coup. .

The laws to set up a Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (in other words, laws to clear past history), and to investigate human rights abuses under the Japanese occupation and military dictatorship, were enacted in 2005. However since the so-called Truth and Reconciliation Laws were mainly dealing with cases of human rights abuses under the Japanese colonial period and the period of authoritar-

[9] These reform laws are four different sets of laws.

ian rule, there is still debate about it, as many cases were more than 15 years ago. The Commission was also given duplicated roles (*Donga Ilbo*, 1 March 2007).

The Media Bills were aimed at preventing any media outlet from achieving a dominant or near monopoly status in the media market. This especially concerned the conservative newspapers *Donga Ilbo*, *Chosun Ilbo* and *JoongAng Ilbo*. These three newspapers control 70 percent of the market. The bills set limits on a single newspaper at 30 percent of the print market and on the three newspapers at 60 percent overall. This meant that any newspapers occupying more than 30 percent of the newspaper market were regarded as market-dominating entrepreneurs. The laws were strongly opposed by the conservative opposition. The Media Bills were passed on 1 January 2005 despite the GNP's opposition but in the following year the Supreme Court overruled the bills on the grounds that the laws would have infringed freedom of information.

The Private School Laws were the most controversial bid among the four reform laws; in trying to block approval of the laws, the GNP staged a boycott outside the National Assembly. The Private School Laws were conceived to ensure fairness in school administration by permitting members of the school governing board to be appointed through an open and fair process. These laws were enacted because corruption among family members of the founders of private schools was being raised as a social issue. Some students were being discriminated against in favour of others who had internal connections to board members, mainly family or relatives of the founders of the schools. Grading, teacher's appointments and recruitment were widely seen as lacking in transparency. The Uri Party initiated a proposal that would allow one-fourth of the board members (more than seven persons) of a private school to be appointed by a School Committee and a University Ordinary Committee, with the rest appointed through open procedures. The Private School Laws were passed on 9 December 2005 with support from the Uri Party, the DLP and the MDP, with 140 votes in approval out of the 154 present and attending in the Regular Session (*Hankyoreh*, 9 December 2005). This happened despite the fierce boycott from the Grand National Party. The GNP started a strike which continued for 53 days, during which its members did not attend the National Assembly Session for 31 days (*Segye Ilbo*, 7 March 2007). This conflict showed how deeply embedded

political conflict was over state involvement in private school administration.

Chung Min-seung, writing in *Weekly Changbi* (10 July 2007), noted that during the Private School Laws debate in 2005, civil society was entirely left out of the discussion. Chung observes that nine legislators from the Uri Party submitted a proposal to amend the laws governing private schools and this was done under lobbying pressure from civil society groups from 2000 to 2002 with one-man boycotts, public meetings and reports on the corrupt private schools. However, when the laws were under process of amendment in the National Assembly, the Uri Party did not work through the Legislative Counselling Office but raised the issue directly in the Session meetings in the legislature. In other words, the Uri Party could have consulted with civil society organisations to ensure a wide range of public support and at the same time could have discussed the issue thoroughly in the Legislative Counselling Office in the legislature before presenting the bid directly to the National Assembly Sessions. The party could have gathered internal support within a small group in the Legislative Counselling Office and consulted with them on whether passing the reform laws appeared feasible. Such lack of skills in compromise and negotiation stimulated furious boycotts by the opposition. In this case the Uri party's majority status was not helpful but only enabled it to pass the law without any support from the opposition parties, and thus without consensus.

In the same *Weekly Changbi* article, Chung argued that the Uri Party believed that fast-tracking the passing of the law would be accepted, given the significance of the proposed reform. Vigorous boycotting by the GNP undermined the Uri Party's competence over the Private School Laws to the point that even some Uri Party legislators started to have second thoughts on the laws and appeared to be willing to negotiate a re-amendment of the laws. Eventually, to bring the GNP back into the National Assembly Session the Uri Party had to show a willingness to renegotiate the Private School Laws. The new version of the laws allowed family members of school founders who were on the board to be presidents of private schools. The amended Private School Laws in 2005 was intended to prevent corruption by family members of school founders, but the (re-)amended version moved back to the earlier situation, resulting in de facto total backtracking by the ruling party (*Media Today*, 5 July 2007).

Debates over the four reform laws caused relations between the government and the opposition to deteriorate seriously. Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan accused the GNP of being a 'chatteki' party, a slighting reference to allegations that, during one election campaign, a truck was found full of cash destined for the party (*Media Today*, 3 November 2004). As a sign of protest against the prime minister's comments, the GNP refused to attend the National Assembly Session for 15 days. Lee Tae-ho (2006: 2) reports that from the 223rd to the 231st National Assembly Sessions (1 June to 9 December 2004), the legislature had 38 days of deadlock out of a total of 146 days of meetings. These GNP boycotts became more frequent, especially during the sessions to approve the Private School Laws.

3.2 *Uri Party's failure to implement reforms*

The Uri Party's period of majority lasted from April 2004 to April 2005. During this period the party expected to implement its policies without encountering serious opposition in the legislature; however, as shown in the case of the Private School Laws debate, without proper negotiation and compromise between parties, it was impossible to complete the passage of the reform laws. Boycotts and refusal to attend assembly sessions were tools constantly used by the opposition to block government action. While the ruling party leaders were jostled or threatened by the opposition, internal conflicts emerged within the Uri Party between the Chaeya[10] faction and the Progressive faction (*Hankuk Ilbo*, 27 December 2004). These internal factions were also competing over the future leadership among members of the party élite such as Kim Geun-tae, Chung Dong-young and Yu Si-min. Chun Jeong-bae, floor leader of the Uri Party, suggested holding a four-person meeting between the Uri Party chairman and floor leader and the GNP chairman and floor leader as the GNP was boycotting the Assembly over the reform laws. The choice for the Uri Party was between passing the laws without the GNP's attendance in the Assembly and negotiating with the GNP. Meetings went on but failed to produce any substantive result.

[10] 'Chaeya' originally signified social élites who were not involved in practical administration but who were more or less influential in politics. Many members of the Chaeya group became National Assemblymen, especially for the Uri Party. Within the Uri Party the Chaeya faction was less progressive than the other faction.

The Uri Party planned to pass the reform laws, especially the amendment of the National Security Laws, before the end of 2004, but with a complete deadlock in parliament, no reform bids were approved. For the entire year, political life in Korea was to all intents paralysed. This caused voters to become increasingly disaffected with the political class and its excessive in-fighting in the legislature. Voters reacted to the Uri Party's perceived incompetence in government by supporting the opposition in two by-elections in April and October 2005.

3.3 *Proposal for a grand coalition*

Searching for a way out of the impasse, President Roh Moo-hyun proposed in July 2005 that the ruling party and the opposition form a grand coalition. This was after the April 2005 by-election which left the Uri Party with 146 seats, whereas the GNP increased its seats from 120 to 125. The Uri Party had lost its majority status within one year of the general election, at a time when the president was about to enter a period of weakness. Roh Moo-hyun expressed his concern that the Uri Party would lose again at the next by-election in October 2005 and at local elections in 2006. Fearing that the party would be trapped in a series of electoral defeats, Roh Moo-hyun proposed building a coalition with the opposition parties (Grand National Party, Democratic Labour Party and Millennium Democratic Party).

On 5 July, President Roh posted an open letter to the population on the Blue House homepage, entitled 'Korean politics need to return to normal'. In this letter he referred to the situation of the government as it faced an opposition holding a majority of seats in the legislature as a recurrent problem in Korean politics, and complained that the president, despite being expected to govern, was not in a position to do so because of a lack of co-operation from the opposition. The ROK, he argued, needed to change its negative attitude towards building coalitions. In many foreign countries coalition-building was common among parties in order to avoid minority governments; nor were grand coalitions absent from Korean political life. In previous years, party mergers had often been signed secretly, but for this reason coalition-building was perceived by the population as some sort of artificial reorganisation of the party system. Roh Moo-hyun maintained that instead of 'sending a secret messenger to the opposition parties to build

a coalition', he was openly suggesting that the coalition should include opposition parties and have an open discussion to overcome the situation of a divided government (*Hankyoreh*, 6 July 2008).

The president's proposal struck South Korea's political landscape like lightning. Made in the realisation that most of the coalitions since democratisation had been built among party élites (mostly party leaders) and that coalition agreements were not open to the public, Roh Moo-hyun's suggestion that a grand coalition be openly discussed was in itself radical. How his suggestion was perceived by opposition parties and within the ruling party was most crucial. Roh Moo-hyun continued to publish open letters to persuade the public of the benefits that a grand coalition would bring to South Korean politics. Some Uri Party members expressed concern about the president's de facto bypassing of the party using what came to be known as 'letter politics'. 'There are roles for the president and roles for the party. If the president goes ahead of the party, the party may be seen as a follower of the president without doing its own job' (*Naeil Shinmun*, 7 July 2005). It seems President Roh did not communicate effectively with his own party on such an important issue. Although his proposal to build a grand coalition to bring about reforms and to mitigate regionalism may have been well intentioned, it is not surprising that the legislators, primarily concerned with their short-term survival in office, were not interested in paving the way for their political demise.

Timing also played a role in destroying the proposal for the grand coalition, which was put forward after the Uri Party had lost a by-election and amid the administration's fears it might lose the following by-election as well as local elections. It seemed more a matter of expediency than of grand strategy. The media and opposition saw the president's suggestion as a make or break move to save his political career (*Breaknews*, 7 July 2007; *Donga Ilbo*, 29 July 2007).

3.4 *A chance to change electoral laws*

A coalition such as President Roh Moo-hyun proposed might have been able to effect a change to the electoral laws, one of the main reasons for a number of structural problems affecting South Korean politics.

Kim Dae-jung had already tried, unsuccessfully, to effect change in this respect. The ruling MDP in 2000 sought to introduce a German-

style mixed-member proportional system with a closed party list in order to mitigate strong electoral regionalism. The mixed-member proportional system allows two votes per voter. One vote is for a candidate of a single member district and the other for a party on a closed party list. Early into his presidency in 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun suggested changing the electoral law to allow a multi-seat constituency-based system, which would permit multiple members to be elected in a larger district. He also showed openness in discussing a mixed-member proportional system as well. Both the constituency-based and mixed-member proportional systems have multi-electorates in a larger district that would combine a few existing small districts into one large district. In such electoral systems a single party may not be able to monopolise the majority of votes in a district.

For Roh Moo-hyun, the problem of a divided government facing a large opposition arose from the structural difficulties created by the conventional electoral laws based on the system of a single winner in a small district. The amendment to the electoral laws effected during the Kim Dae-jung administration led to a system of one voter, two votes,[11] which had allowed a small and vulnerable party like the DLP to emerge with ten seats in the 2004 general elections. President Roh suggested introducing a medium-sized constituency to elect multiple members in a larger district. Such a constituency would work against regional votes. With this electoral system the Uri Party would have gained more seats in the Yŏngnam region, where it would be the second most popular party after the GNP. The greater population of the Yŏngnam region means a larger body of electors, and as the second most popular party in Yŏngnam the Uri Party could have hoped to benefit more than the GNP could have from Honam, where the Uri Party was most popular.

While the GNP remained silent, the DLP agreed to the idea of changing the electoral laws. They insisted on moving to a mixed-member proportional system which includes multi-seat constituency allowing multiple-member electorates in larger districts. If a mixed-member proportional system had been implemented at the 17th general election in 2004, the DLP could have gained 39 seats, up from the 10 seats they won with the present electoral system (*Donga Ilbo*, 11 July 2005). However, on the proposal for a grand coalition, even the DLP was in fundamental disagreement.

[11] One vote goes to the candidate and the other to the party.

President Roh reached the point of suggesting that he was willing to hand over his presidential powers to coalition partners if they agreed to change the electoral laws (*Breaknews*, 7 July 2005). At the same time, *Donga Ilbo* (29 July 2005) suggested, the proposal for the grand coalition was conceived as an attempt to regain the political initiative and win elections through a change of electoral laws which would ultimately benefit the Uri Party. If the GNP had accepted the proposal, the grand coalition would have created ruling parties with a surplus majority that would have taken 90 percent of the total seats in the legislature.

3.5 *Out of touch with the electorate*

Another element in President Roh Moo-hyun's political decline was his failure to perceive popular needs. A common view among voters was that Roh, with his obsession over the grand coalition, did not pay attention to the people's real needs. The lack of economic growth mattered more than party mergers or coalitions. The gap in housing prices between rich and poor areas grew, and so did the divide between the wealthy and the poor. South Korea's per capita income increased from US$12,826 in 2003 to US$20,081 in 2007, but this 57 percent increase was primarily due to the Korean won's devaluation against the US dollar from 1,200 won to 930 won (*Seoul Shinmun*, 23 February 2008). According to a report from the Korea National Statistical Office, the average monthly income per person was 2,650,000 won in 2003 but increased to 3,220,000 won in 2007, that is, by 570,000 won. However, according to the same *Seoul Shinmun* report, the level of deficit[12] showed that the 20 percent of the population on high incomes had a 2,000,000 won sufficiency of income, but the 20 percent on low incomes had a deficit of 340,000 won a month. When Roh Moo-hyun proposed the grand coalition, public opinion surveys revealed that 84.6 percent saw economic issues as more important than electoral reform issues (*Munhwa Ilbo*, 7 December 2005).

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that political parties play an important role in linking the state with its citizens (Lawson 1988: 15). As shown above, the party plays an important role in linking society with politics. One of the difficulties encountered by the Uri

[12] A deficit is calculated when total consumption is extracted from income.

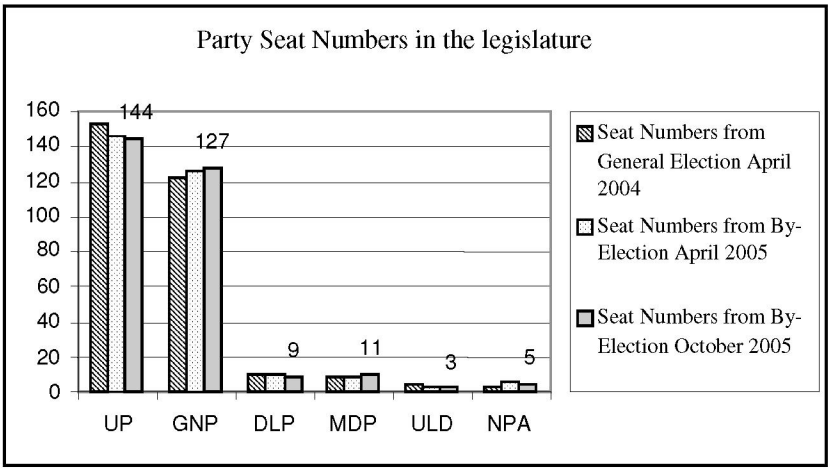
Party and President Roh was that they came to be regarded as increasingly detached from people's real needs. Lee Myung-bak, a former mayor of Seoul, who campaigned on a platform of economic growth, by contrast received landslide support of 48.7 percent in the December 2007 presidential elections, whereas Chung Dong-young representing the United New Democratic Party (effectively the successor to the Uri Party) received 26.1 percent and Lee Hoi-chang 15.1 percent.

3.6 *Demise of the Uri Party*

As Figure 1 shows, party seat numbers changed after the by-election in October 2005, the second of two by-elections that year, leaving the Uri Party with 144 seats and the GNP with 127 seats. This was the beginning of the end for the Uri Party. After the failure of the proposal for a grand coalition and the two by-election defeats, President Roh Moo-hyun rapidly lost control. In late 2006, fission and fusion among parties began anew in the run-up to the presidential election in 2007. On 6 February 2007, 23 Uri Party legislators switched party allegiance following the defection of a few party leaders including Chun Jeong-bae. The Uri Party became the second party after the GNP and by June 2007 was reduced to 73 seats through further defections. In August 2007, the Uri Party ended its political life after less than four years, merged with the defectors' Democratic New Party and later built a coalition with other small progressive parties (the Centrist Democratic Party, the Millennium Democratic Party, and the Centrist Reform Party) to fight in the presidential election as the United New Democratic Party.

In an interview with the *Ohmynews* newspaper, Roh Moo-hyun, speaking later of his attempt to build a grand coalition, acknowledged: 'I threw a bomb called a "Proposal for a Grand Coalition" to the opposition parties, but it exploded in my own yard, the Uri Party' (*Seoul Shinmun*, 11 October 2007).

Figure 1 Party seat numbers from general election 2004 and two by-elections 2005



Source: Author, data from National Election Commission.

4 CONCLUSION

When President Roh Moo-hyun won a majority in the general election that followed his own election to office in 2003, he broke the pattern of a president set against a hostile parliament, but within a year lost that advantage. Thereafter he tried, through proposing coalition government to the opposition parties, to regain a majority. He failed again, his Uri Party fell apart through defections, and the electorate, dissatisfied with what it saw as his incompetence and preoccupation with his own aims, rejected his successor, Chung Dong-young, in 2007. In the end, his administration experienced similar levels of internal disruption and instability to those of preceding administrations.

This article has argued that, although Roh Moo-hyun and his predecessors appeared to see the problem primarily in terms of securing a parliamentary majority for their administration, the basic weakness in the ROK political system is not the difficulty in achieving a government majority but a low level of institutionalisation of political parties. This manifests itself through a constant movement of fission and fusion among parties and is reinforced by strong regional voting behaviour that undermines the institutionalisation process through

allowing single party monopolies in certain regions. Scholars (Cheibub 2002; Strøm and Müller 2001; Cheibub, Przeworski and Saiegh 2004; Mainwaring and Scully 1995) have argued that cabinet stability or governability does not necessarily derive from the size of the government but owes much to institutional constraints and party internal mechanisms exerted through party rules that are observed. The ROK may be a case in point, as political instability and sometimes ungovernability owe more to the internal mechanisms of South Korean party politics, I argue, than to the presence or absence of a majority. As suggested by *Kukmin Ilbo* (29 July 2005), the problem for South Korean politics would seem to lie in a political culture that lacks space for compromise and negotiation.

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