

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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July 5, 1984

Party Politicking in a Vacuum

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Dear Peter,

In conversations with Korean acquaintances, I've found that many people become confused when talking about National Assembly politics. They can't remember the names of the three major political parties, or confuse them with each other. These are not people who make a point of following all the ins and outs of the latest political intrigues, but still many of them are college graduates who read daily newspapers. They are not uninterested in politics. It is just that the parties are confusing.

After the last military coup, the government forced all the old parties--government and opposition--to close down. It banned their leaders from political activity, wiped the slate clean and called for new, "clean" political parties in their stead. That step merely repeated the action that former-President Park Chung-hee took when he took power in 1961. In the thirty years since the Korean War, the Korean people have had to try to straighten out three different sets of political parties, with smaller parties popping up and folding in the mean time, with individual politicians switching from party to party (Koreans call them "migrant birds"), and reappearing in different coalitions after coups. Who can blame people for being confused?

But in truth, the names of the parties do not matter much. For most people it is enough to know about "yo" and "ya"--the "government" and the "opposition" parties. "Yo" these days is the Democratic Justice Party (DJP). It is a Party with a very short history, founded in 1981 more or less as the personal support organization for President Chun Doo-hwan, who staged a military coup the previous year. Despite its newness, the Party handily won a majority of legislative seats in the last election, and no one doubts that it will do as well in the upcoming elections. Yet these days the government party is deeply disturbed.

For one, in a scandal that surfaced in late June, Party Chairman Jung Nae-hiuk was forced to resign after anonymous letters sent to major newspapers claimed that he had amassed vast wealth in his years of public service. The newspapers quickly dubbed it the "anonymous note affair," and lo and behold, the

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charges turned out to be true. The identity of the note writer, Mun Hyong-dae, came out quickly enough though. Mun was an old personal rival of Jung, dating back to the years when they served together as generals in the army. Both men enjoyed successful careers, Mun as a four-star general serving as chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, while Jung once served as Minister of Defense. Since they came from the same political district in Cholla Nam Do, Mun had to discredit Jung in order to gain the DJP's nomination in the upcoming election, and be able to run for the Assembly himself. He had run successfully in the late 1970s, but later fell under the political ban, possibly at Jung's insistence. In any case, the affair has destroyed both men politically, and has dragged the name of their Party through the mud more effectively than any opposition politician could. If the DJP had any claim to legitimacy, it was that it would clean up politics. Now that has been shattered. The Party, which is led largely by retired generals, is now talking about how to regain its "reformist zeal."

For another, the Party is preparing to draw up a slate of nominees for the election, and up to 60% of the current assemblymen may be out on the street. Until two weeks ago, the figure batted around was over 40%, but now the Party leadership wants to screen people out who look embarrassingly rich. (Koreans commonly assume that anyone who is extremely rich must have done something illegal.) The main criteria for gaining the Party's favor, it seems, is to show dedicated loyalty. It will also help people to know a little about foreign affairs, or agriculture, or maybe the economy. In the last election, the Party loaded on quite a few people who had famous names to try to broaden the base of support for the President. But with the Presidential succession scheduled to take place during the next Assembly term (and Korea has never had a peaceful succession), Party leaders have decided that more than anything they need a tightly disciplined and loyal organization that will fall into line behind President Chun's chosen successor, whoever that may be.

On the face of things, it is an odd reversal of roles for an electoral party, that a party executive committee can sweep aside a majority of its elected representatives with no worry for its own future, that a Party can rapidly flush out most of its members without losing its identity in the public's eye. This situation merely reflects the fact that the Party derives its strength not from the people who vote for it, but from the President and his control over Korea's military and civilian bureaucracies. The Party is there to provide support for the President, not to represent people. And Korea's electoral system insures that.

The electoral system is a unique one. Winning a majority of assembly seats in local district elections is virtually impossible, but the party that receives the most votes wins a bonus equal to one-fourth of the assembly seats, plus a proportionate share of another fourth. Representatives appointed by the party leadership fill these bonus seats. So even though the Democratic Justice Party won just 36% of the vote in the last election, it controls a majority in the assembly.

Korean voters elect two representatives from each district, casting but one vote. For a Party to win a majority of seats, it would have to win a seat in every electoral district and win both seats in at least one district.

Winning both seats in one district requires not only many supporters, but a tight local organization so that party supporters will be able to split their votes evenly. No party has an organization like that, and the greater danger is that party supporters will split their votes causing both candidates to lose. So far, the parties have run only one candidate per district.

On the other hand, candidates need not win a plurality of votes to be elected. Coming in second is good enough. That makes electioneering at least marginally less cutthroat. And it allows for a multi-party system, even though the smaller parties have no power at all in the National Assembly. In the last election, twelve parties ran candidates, eight of them successfully.

The government party receives most of its votes in rural districts, where the government carefully controls the flow of pork barrel. Now, as election season approaches, there is a flurry of road building, dam projects, and the like. Government party representatives inevitably appear at ground-breaking and ribbon-cutting ceremonies, illustrating the link between votes for the President's party and public works construction. Given the government's well practiced ability to shut off the flow of public money to districts that vote for the opposition, most rural voters go along.

The cities are less easily manipulated, though, and they tend to vote more for opposition candidates. But even though urban electoral districts are more populous, they still elect just two representatives. A rural vote can have four times the value of a vote in some of the larger urban districts.

This imbalance has given fuel to an opposition demand for reform of the election law and the districting system, and at the time of writing, negotiations among the parties to change the law are drawing to a furious unsuccessful close. The ruling party, naturally, has no reason to want to change the system. Yet the opposition complaints are obviously just, so the DJP wants to appear reasonable and try to limit damaging publicity over the issue. That it has done with surprising flair.

There are two major opposition parties: the Democratic Korea Party (DKP), composed partly of remnants of the main opposition party from the Park era (the party of the leading banned opposition leaders Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam), and the Korea National Party (KNP), which traces its roots to the party that supported President Park. The DKP, the largest of the opposition parties with 22% of the vote in the last election, has proposed maintaining the system of two representatives from each district while splitting the large urban districts, thus equalizing the value of urban and rural votes. The Korea National Party, the third largest party with 13% of the votes, has proposed electing from two to four representatives from each district, according to population size. The proposal would obviously create more electoral opportunities for itself, since it narrowly lost the second slot in many districts during the last election.

The DJP, for its part, has cleverly proposed electing from one to three representatives from each district, depending on district size. It would clearly win the single seat districts, which would be rural ones, causing the DKP to lose the second slot, while the KNP would probably pick up extra seats in the three-member districts. The DJP would benefit since it would face two smaller

opposition parties of more equal size, instead of one threateningly large one and one small one. The KNP says it will accept the DJP formula, while the DKP has fiercely resisted it. In the face of the deadlock, the old law will continue in force. The DJP wins the propaganda victory of looking reasonable and flexible, while making the DKP look silly and obstinate.

The opposition parties have also proposed scrapping the preferential system of awarding national constituency seats--one half going automatically to the winning Party, the rest to be distributed proportionally. The government party will not give up its premium here, arguing that political stability requires that the largest party command a majority in the assembly. And there is some validity to that, since the electoral system makes it impossible to win a majority through popular election alone. But the DJP has shown some flexibility here, and is considering a KNP proposal to distribute the remainder of national constituency seats according to the proportion of votes received by each party, instead of the proportion of seats captured in the elections. That formula would not affect the DJP seat count much, but it would cause seats to be transferred from the DKP to the KNP. So the ruling party has found that it can handily play off its opponents against each other.

There are some issues on which the parties have found agreement however. Most of them are apparently technical ones, such as increasing the number of joint electoral rallies, where the candidates can address their constituencies. They have also proposed to triple the size of cash deposits required from independent candidates from about \$12,500 to \$37,000. That deposit is returned only if the candidate wins the election and would be a powerful deterrent to capriciously entering the race. They also want to complicate the bothersome technical requirements for registering an independent candidacy. The independent candidates will have to produce five or six hundred signatures in their support to get on the ballot. That is not new, but now each signature may have to be accompanied by a certificate from the district administrative office verifying the individual's personal seal. That requires each individual to go to the district office, wait on line, and pay a small fee--a time-consuming chore that might make it difficult for many independent candidates to get enough signatures.

The government party, preparing as it is to gut its own ranks, has also proposed that any person who leaves a political party, voluntarily or not, within six months of an election will be barred from running for office, either independently or as another party's candidate. The DKP, however, has opposed that, probably figuring that it may be the beneficiary of government party defections.

On one key issue, though, the means to guarantee a fair election, agreement has been hard to come by. The opposition parties have proposed that lists of qualified voters be distributed to the political parties, and that party representatives sit on the election management committees to check voters against the lists. This is really the only way to guarantee against illegally stuffing the ballot box. Yet the ruling party has opposed this measure on the grounds that it is a bothersome procedure and too expensive to administer. Many people fear that if the ruling party thinks it cannot win a fair election, it will do what it has to do.

All of this maneuvering has raised eyebrows among people who follow the political scene. Newspaper editorials have complained that the parties' positions are too obviously self-serving and narrow minded, and will, if carried out, only restrict the choices of the Korean people when they go into the voting booth.

The stalemate in the election law negotiations has left the main opposition party feeling more betrayed than ever. It feels betrayed because it has gone so far already in support of a political system that is, from a democratic standpoint, an obvious farce, a farce because there is no genuine competition, no real possibility that the opposition can ever win. Politicians who spoke out against military dictatorship earlier, or who might have posed a genuine threat were banned from the last election. The elected DKP is the "moderate" opposition, the opposition that agreed to accept and support a political system imposed by military dictatorship. Most people do not take them seriously as a genuine focus for political opposition. Policy-wise, they don't offer a coherent program that is different from the ruling party. They are Tweedledum out of power, and with no genuine hope of ever gaining power. So for all their compromises with the reality of military dictatorship, all of their willingness to go along with the ruling party, they have not gotten much out of it. They have no meaningful say in policy-making, no influence in the government, no way to deliver the pork barrel to their constituents, and, in view of the results of the negotiations to revise the election law, no hope of competing fairly in electoral competition to gain more power and influence. Their biggest concern has been to convince the Korean people that they are a legitimate opposition, and they have obviously failed.

The opposition parties act like a Greek chorus. They shake their fingers and cry at all the latest news that embarrasses the government. They now call for the Minister of Defense to resign because of a brawl involving some soldiers outside an army camp. They want the Minister of Agriculture to go because Korea imported some diseased cattle from the United States. When the opposition doesn't get its way, it shrieks and refuses to attend committee meetings. The opposition wants more help for rural families, who did not get an increase in the state-administered price of grain last year. But for all their steam, the government has announced that it is formulating a package to virtually eliminate the agricultural land tax. When it goes into effect in the fall, just prior to the election, you can bet that the opposition parties will not receive much credit for helping poor farmers. And you can bet that farmers or anyone else who needs help will not turn to the opposition parties. And not many will turn to the ruling party either. The opposition is powerless, while the "ruling" party is hemmed in by the prerogatives of the government, whose main concern is rapid economic growth and stability.

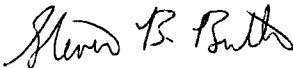
And that is a danger for Korea. One of the recent scandals that has prompted the opposition to call for the resignation of the Minister of Home Affairs is a collective action by taxi drivers in Taegu (Korea's third largest city). The drivers parked their cars in the downtown streets and jammed up traffic, demanding a reduction in the amount of money they must give each day to the taxi companies. Of course, government leaders condemned the action, but the drivers will win at least some of their demands because, in fact, they were reasonable. Collective action, apparently, works. A group of Buddhist

nuns recently staged a sit-in in a court house to protest a film they said insulted them. They tried to stage a march out of the main Chogyo Temple in downtown Seoul, but after a clash with police were dispersed. Finally, though, the producer agreed to stop production of the film. The government has dismissed these as isolated incidents, and loudly proclaimed the evils of collective action as a way to resolve disputes. But the fact is that the current system gives people few alternatives to resolve their grievances. They have no other way to make their voices felt in places where it matters. And this makes the political system very brittle.

Korea is something like a bottle of soda shaken up by the rapid social and economic changes that have reshaped the face of this country in less than a generation. Just now the cap is firmly in place, and in normal times the Korean government has shown it can keep it there. So many people say that in recent years Korea has "returned to political stability." But despite the oft-cited moves toward liberalization, such as lifting the political ban on many politicians and letting students demonstrate on campus, nothing has been put in place to catch the explosion if some domestic crisis should pop the cap off the bottle. Looking over Korea's recent past, how long can it squeak by without a domestic crisis?

Korea still lacks a set of rules that most people can agree on, by which they can fight out their differences and accept victory or defeat. Political parties provide vehicles for that in many countries, but they won't in Korea until the National Assembly is transformed from a club of ins and outs dickering over rules and trading accusations into a forum where politicians can genuinely compete and win or lose. Who knows, if that happens, maybe people will even remember the names of their political parties.

Best,



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Received in Hanover 7/26/84