

FUTUREtakes

Transcultural Futurist Magazine

ISSN 1554-7744

Vol. 5, no. 2 (Summer-Fall 2006)

The (Political) Party is Over?

South Korea – Leader in E-Democracy

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Since the end of World War II, Korean society has been characterized by rapid changes, especially in the area of governance. Like democracy in other countries, Korean democracy is messy and inefficient, more so than in other countries because of its short time span, about 18 years. However, democracy in South Korea has changed tremendously since the 1987 election.

An Information Technology (IT) stronghold, South Korea is becoming a testing ground for newly developed IT equipment and with it, IT-driven political polling that heralds the Neo-Direct Democracy and the end of powerful and influential political parties. We take it for granted that political parties are vital to modern political life since they have shaped representative democracies since the end of the nineteenth century. But political parties as powerful political machines may soon disappear, due to mass Internet use that easily delivers popular opinions to the government. Korea will be the model for this, due to its highest usage of the Internet in the world. Korean people will use mobile phones, digital multimedia broadcasting (DMB) phones, and direct electronic ballot systems to vote directly on issues, bypassing political parties and politicians as they are inefficient, self-centered, corrupt, and no longer represent the views of their districts or the public. The “hurry, hurry” culture of Korea will have no need of inefficient and corrupt Korean politicians and political parties. Citizens will submit the bills in the name of non-government organizations (NGOs) or civic groups in order to have national referendums and electronic polls that deliver their opinions on various issues.

WESTERN DEMOCRACY ON THE MARCH

A majority of people in the world now live in democratic countries or countries that have begun to implement some democratic and political reforms. Western nation-states indicate a historical pattern: first democracy, then stable, prosperous and secure democracies, then neoliberal market democracies.

At the dawn of the new millennium, democracy and freedom continue as dominant trends in Western and East-Central Europe, in the Americas, and increasingly in the Asian-Pacific region. In the former Soviet Union the picture remains mixed, with progress toward freedom stalled and a number of countries consolidating into dictatorships. In Africa, free societies and electoral democracies remain a

distinct minority. While there are no true democracies or free countries within the Arab world, and a low proportion of free and democratic Muslim states, 1999 was a year of democratic ferment in the Islamic world. Democracy has never been a finished thing but has instead been continually renewed, redefined and reinvented, drawing on political struggles in many places. And in this reinvention, the interaction of social movements and elite power holders has been crucial.

DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT IN SOUTH KOREA

No longer a backward society, South Korea today is an educated, urban, industrial, middle-class nation. Social and economic changes have occurred much faster than political changes. This imbalance between advanced society and political backwardness has been a major cause of political instability and has enabled Korean radicalism to dramatize the contradictions within the Korean polity. Furthermore, South Korea's modern political institutions – the executive branch, the National Assembly, the Supreme Court, political parties, and interest groups – still lack two crucial cultural ingredients for rapid institutionalization of democracy. These ingredients are a democratic tradition and democratic attitude. Indeed, until recently South Korea was a politically backward nation relying on repression to cope with the problems stemming from rapid social and economic changes. During the past forty years, a very short time span, these rapid and dramatic changes have forced Korea to join the ranks of advanced societies. The urban population has increased exponentially. In the 1940s, nearly 75 percent of the people lived in rural areas. Today, South Korea has a population of over 46 million, and 80 percent of the people live in urban or metropolitan areas.

In 2004, South Korea went through a constitutional crisis through the impeachment of the President. However, President Roh was saved by the young generation who organized gatherings and demonstrations in his support through the Internet. Upon his return to office, President Roh continued to ignore politics and his own ruling party by dealing with citizens directly through the government's Information Office Internet newspapers and various department-owned websites to persuade the public directly, bypassing the political parties. He is the first president to put little weight on party politics and to even ignore them in favor of efforts to deal the public directly.

CHALLENGES AND “FORCING FUNCTIONS”

1. The limitations of representative democracy

Voting via representatives is problematic. The majority sometimes does not recognize the rights of the minority or individual liberty. Majority rule is the tyranny of democracy. There still are exclusions from voting that may be based on age, gender, mental capacity, criminal record, literacy, ethnicity, citizenship, etc. The larger the number of exclusions, the lesser the degree of democracy. Furthermore, the Will of the People is not always motivated by the highest and best moral values; power and self interest are far better predictors of who wins elections. John Stuart Mill's “Tyranny of the Majority” can easily be seen in budding democracies.

2. Apathy among young voters

The key tool of modern representative democracy is elections. The legitimacy of the authority of representatives in a democratic society comes from the approval they receive from the citizens through elections. However, in some democracies, a majority of the people do not vote, as illustrated by the 2005 elections in Texas in which the city council members were elected by the 10% of the voters who turned out. People do not vote because 90% of them are alienated and believe that their votes do not make any difference.

In South Korea, turnouts for polls and elections are at an all time low, less than 20% for local and bi-elections, and less than 50% for general elections. In the latest National Assembly bi-elections, only 21 percent of voters in their twenties participated, compared to 61.2 percent of voters in their sixties. Political apathy among young people is not new, but when there is such a disparity between age groups it is too serious to ignore. A drop in voting rates is a crisis in participation in the process and a crisis in legitimate representation. The results of the bi-elections have only half the representative legitimacy they should have. When elections that choose the people's representatives become events for middle-aged and elderly voters, it is a crisis for Korean democracy as a whole, regardless of comments about advantages for certain political parties.

3. Corruption and distrust

Most Korean citizens believe the country is tainted due to the scandals involving leaders including politicians. According to a research survey in December 2005, more than 95 percent of respondents answered that they have heard of corruption scandals from someone they know or from media reports. The poll of 2,000 citizens and 300 leading figures was conducted at the request of the Council for the Korean Pact on Anti-Corruption and Transparency to mark the International Anti-Corruption Day, which fell on Dec. 9.

Similarly, another recent survey, this one of 1,500 adults regarding their perceptions of the "uprightness" of leading figures in Korean society, showed that four out of five Koreans deeply distrust political and economic leaders because of their lack of moral integrity. Concerning questions about their commitment to basic duties such as mandatory military service and tax payments, 82 percent of those surveyed said that the leaders fail to uphold their duties due to their own social and economic power. About 66 percent of the respondents showed an "extreme" distrust in the leaders. In addition, the survey showed that the public's distrust about the moral status of the upper class in society has reached a serious level. About 22 percent of the respondents cited a lack of responsibility as the most serious problem, followed by unfair actions with 19 percent, arrogance with 17 percent, and the lack of moral integrity with 14 percent. However, 88 percent said most corrupt leaders end up with a lighter punishment than the gravity of their wrongdoing warranted.

In public confidence and trust in the political system to build effectiveness and sustainability, Korea's experience is especially interesting as a young and vigorous democracy. Democratization is not a linear process that moves from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Democracies may remain fragile long after multiparty elections are established. They may be mismanaged or may be unable to maintain peace and security, deliver public welfare, to assist economic growth. Expectations of democracy may be higher in newly established democracies, and checks and balances against abuse may be lower, meaning disillusionment and reversals may be more frequent, but weaknesses in the political process can exist also in long-established multiparty systems.

Corrupt business-government relations have been a major problem in Korea. But while government intervention in the financial sector may have fed the economic growth of the 1960s and 1970s, it left banks in a precarious position when economic conditions later worsened. The main lubricant of the old system, money politics, has worsened, not improved, under democracy because politicians now have an even greater need for campaign funds from the businesses. Candidates still need to spend huge sums to motivate voters through various means, including vote buying. Most official political party income comes from private business "support groups" (*huwonhoe*) and from state subsidies.

Corruption has always been a fundamental threat to the quality of democracy. Opinion polls data

in other transitional countries show a serious decline in support for democracy when citizens see politicians as corrupt and aloof from their concerns. This is a serious threat for the survival of democracy in many countries.

However, recent reforms in South Korea will lessen the influence of large corporations and the media. Large corporations typically used to make large contributions to the governing party, but this is prohibited by law as of March 2006, and this prohibition will change the political power in Korea. If the politicians cannot receive enough funds from the companies, the advantages of becoming politicians will diminish. Companies that cannot pay funds to politicians will not approach politicians and therefore will not face corruption charges with politicians. Instead, they will have a transparent business process without political influence in various business decisions. Therefore, the media, which are owned by or obtain advertisements from large corporations, will not cover much of political affairs, and their political power will drastically diminish to the level of the Western world.

4. The obsolescence of political parties

Political parties no longer have a lock on legitimacy and are no longer required for voting. In the West, political parties are losing their grip as more civil rights groups and NGOs are bypassing political parties and going directly to the administration. Furthermore, political parties have based their platforms on ideological and class divides that are becoming less important, especially in more advanced societies. The labels “left” and “right” have less and less meaning. Citizens have developed multiple interests, diverse senses of belonging, and overlapping identities.

Some political parties have managed to adapt, for example, the British Labour party or Brazil’s Workers Party whose economic policies have very little to do with their union origins. Yet, political dislocation exists alongside a growing fatigue with traditional forms of political representation. People no longer trust the political establishment. They want a greater say in public matters and usually prefer to voice their own interests directly or through interest groups. The debate on genetically modified food in Europe, for example, can hardly be understood without reference to NGOs such as Greenpeace. Likewise, the rejection of the European constitution in France and the Netherlands demonstrates that major political parties have little leverage once an issue is posed to the people.

ENTER “IT”

Korea’s Internet usage rate is the top in the world, and Internet users, i.e., netizens, are more powerful in political or opinion moulding than ever before. With the recent lowering of the voting age to 18 years, the next political elections are unpredictable while netizen power is increasing dramatically. Seventy percent of South Koreans go online periodically, reaffirming the nation’s status as an Internet powerhouse, according to a government survey. The Ministry of Information and Communication (MIC) said in 2005 that Korea had 31.6 million Internet users at the end of 2004, up 2.4 million from a year earlier. Internet users, defined as those who access the Web for one hour or more a month, made up 70.2 percent of the nation’s 4.5 million people aged six or above. This puts Korea in the higher echelon of the world ranking.

Despite the substantial increase in the number of middle-aged users, the survey revealed that a digital divide by sex, age and region is still a grim reality. Among them, the age demographic is most serious as the gap in usage rate between teenagers and 50+ year-olds amounts to 65.2 percentage points. Around 17.06 million men (75.9 percent) accessed the Internet regularly last year compared to 14.52 million women (64.6 percent), for an 11.3 percentage point difference.

Yet, there is the growing trend of get-your-information-anytime-anywhere in Korea. By late 2006, a majority of wireless users will be equipped with smart phones capable of unlimited connection to the Net. Then, Korea's mobile Internet market will start to explode.

E-DEMOCRACY

Direct democracy is not new. Historically, its voting systems have included direct vote on issues by means of tribal governance and at town hall meetings. There were also California's "Propositions." However, through the rapid expansion of technology, this whole idea of direct democracy is revived. Whereas in the old days, direct voting was restricted by place, distance, time and cost of election, true direct democracy through the Internet, mobile phones, and electronic balloting equipment is now developing. Polling is done before the people actually vote in elections. People vote on large TV screens, and this is the return of direct democracy. Federal, state and city level direct pollings are common now.

An IT stronghold, South Korea ranked fifth in 2005 in the United Nations' evaluation of e-government readiness among 191 countries, thanks to its advanced IT and nationwide broadband network. The Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs stated on Dec. 18, 2005 that the country's e-government standing has remained at fifth place for two years in a row, the highest among Asian countries.

People no longer read conventional newspapers, and as a result, political parties and the government find new ways to attract public attention, through portal sites. People express their opinions through blogs and Internet comments. As South Korea ranks fifth in the UN evaluation of e-government, there are many phenomena of new generations breeding activities that may lead to a complete change in the political aspects. Korea is the first country to encounter the new high-tech society's illness and new shaping of political appetites. Internet portals are elbowing out newspapers in the online news service market, as a growing number of people get their news information through the online portals, not through newspaper homepages. According to KoreanClick, an Internet usage analyzer, the number of page views (hits) of the portals' new services skyrocketed by as many as 35 times for the past three years, while that of the newspapers' homepages leveled off or declined. In the case of the major portal www.daum.net, its news service's page views stood at around 110 million in July 2002 but soared to nearly 3.8 billion in June 2005, a 34.5-fold increase. Another major portal, www.naver.com, saw its news page views surge by a factor of 12 to 2.82 billion for the corresponding period.

Representative political systems are dying due to the direct democracy demonstrated in Korea recently. Starting from Roh's presidential election where many young voters were mobilized by the Internet to support him, and World Cup Cheerings and Candle Light Demonstrations where smart mobs mobilized instantly to show their opinions, direct participation in direct expression of their opinions becomes a new way of democracy in Korea. The top Internet and mobile phone usage enable Korea to lead a new direct democracy.

CONCLUSIONS

South Korea will change to an Internet-driven democracy to eliminate politics, political parties, and politicians in 10-20 years and will be a model for Western countries to follow. Individuals will have more power than politicians, and with their collective intelligence or collective powers to inspire people on the spot to send messages or to revolt, conventional democracy will certainly change such that representatives are no longer required for intelligent agents who live in Cyberspace. In order to cope with these new emerging generations, people may have to invent totally different methods and means for popular leadership, forms of parliament, and forms of government.

Young generations, who do not pay much attention to old traditions and majority ideas, will continue expressing themselves through notes and article contributions to government websites and various portal sites, even though they generally do not vote in large numbers. They will act quickly and will vote if they want to change the situation. Their changes of values and ideas in politics are being facilitated by the Internet and mobile phones. Furthermore, as they are multiple-selves, they have to be approached in their own languages and own interests. They are interested in globalization and mixing cultures, and they tend to worry about their job futures and their wellbeing in early ages. Policies for globalization, diverse cultural activities and promises, and job possibilities will bring them into politics. They will not vote for their regional heroes or for their academic backgrounds, nor will they otherwise choose their representatives like the older generations. Instead, they will choose candidates with ideas of rapidly changing futures and future strategies.

The futurists here foresee that political parties have had their prosperity and are ending their lifespans as major players in more than 200 years of Representative Democracy. They are at a critical junction and are becoming irrelevant. In shaping public policy, they can be bypassed by modern communications, the Internet, and citizens' groups. Political parties will have to either recapture the public imagination or accept that others deserve a seat at the political table. Otherwise, the "party" may be over. Leadership without leaders is expected in the near future.

One of the most important challenges for the next century will be to achieve local, national and world democratic governance based on principles that are freely agreed upon by the social actors involved (both state and non-state players). The democratization of the world beyond the states has yet to begin. We appear to stand at another such epochal moment of redeployment of power, away from national states and toward transnational actors. The unrivalled democratization of the states is now challenged by a new redeployment of world power. It remains to be seen whether the construction of the world order of the twenty-first century continues as a nearly exclusively elite project or whether social movements can inject a more democratic element into the emerging structures of global governance.

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POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send your comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *Will e-democracy (IT-enabled democracy) impact the role and relevance of the nation-state, and if so, how? Conversely, will the (otherwise) changing role of the nation-state impact voting?*
- *Is voter apathy a characteristic of a mature democracy? What other factors may account for voter apathy? A perceived lack of real choices? Fatalism? Complacency? Higher priorities in one's life – and limited time? A perception that politicians are not addressing the most fundamental or important issues such as "making ends meet" or "not having enough hours in the day"?*
- *To what extent do youth inherently make better "futurists" than other generations, given their imagination and the fact that their thinking is less "contaminated" by conventional wisdom and popular assumptions?*
- *If Western nations adopt e-democracy, how will that change the near-term focus of many*

elected officials – who make decisions based on near-term gain and are safely re-elected, or out of office, when the consequences occur (that is, “buy now, pay later”)?

- *Polls can be fickle (that is, change rapidly) – and while some politicians are driven by near-term public sentiment, others do not. Will e-government be equally fickle, or can it commit itself to courses of action for the long-term, especially on highly polarizing issues?*
- *How will e-democracy impact the balance of power among the branches of government – the legislative, the executive, and the judicial?*
- *What kinds of people will be attracted to public service in an e-democracy?*
- *In an e-democracy in which one can “feast” on customized information and close themselves off from opposing views – will voters take the time to read opposing views on an issue? Or will limited time reinforce the phenomenon of “sound byte politics”? Related question: will information overload limit e-democracy?*
- *In consideration of issues that are highly polarizing – and recent close elections in the US, Mexico, and elsewhere – will “tyranny of the (close) majority” be the norm in an e-democracy?*
- *Will the “digital divide” impact e-democracy – and if so, how? Or, will there be a closing of the digital divide such that will not be a factor?*
- *How will IT impact leisure time and “down time”? Will people choose to be “unplugged,” at least for short periods? Conversely, is IT addiction (now in several countries) a creation of, or a result of, a stimulation-oriented society and/or an instant gratification culture such as the US?”*
- *The US is also a “hurry, hurry” culture. Is such a culture an inevitable result of IT and/or high-tech in general, or are other factors involved?*
- *In other countries, will “netocracy” (direct voting by citizens) impact the role of money in politics? Why or why not?*
- *Hurricane Katrina, which hit the US Gulf Coast in September 2005, resulted in a partial localized breakdown of civilization. Will IT mitigate similar breakdowns in the future, or will it leave civilization more vulnerable to breakdowns?*
- *The article characterizes the emerging younger generation as “multiple selves” and further states that “Citizens have developed multiple interests, diverse senses of belonging, and overlapping identities.” Will IT help citizens pursue several interests and thereby facilitate the return of the “Renaissance Man / Woman”?*