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Background of New Leadership

– Roh Mu-hyun and South Korean Society –

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Already two and half years have passed since Roh Mu-hyun government started in South Korea. In the years, South Korean politics has experienced dramatic changes. First drama was a split of his ruling party. Millennium Democratic Party, as whose candidate Roh won the presidential election in 2002, was a minority in South Korean parliament, when Roh's regime started. So Roh had to face strong resistances of the opposition, Grand National Party, very often at the parliament.

In this hard situation, different from other political leaders, Roh never tried to increase the member of his party. He rather split his small ruling party and organized new but smaller 'real' ruling party, The Uri Party, which just occupied 20% seats in the parliament. Roh's intention here is to kick out conservative members from the ruling party and purify it as a party for 'reformation', which Roh's government promised at the presidential election. We can say that Roh tried to solve the situation making small but pure, solid and royal ruling party around the president.

However, as a result of this split of the ruling party, Roh had to face harder resistance at the parliament, because Democratic Party, which was abandoned by the president, turned its position to the opposition. They firmly stood against the government, with their old rival, Grand National Party.

Roh Mu-hyun, there again, played a very tricky game. He did not try to get any compromise with the oppositions to solve the situation. He rather repeated

provocative statements against the oppositions, because general election of the parliament was scheduled soon by the constitution. By this provocation by the president, angry oppositions finally impeached the president for less grounded arguments, just two months before the general election. Public opinion severely criticizes the impeachment, with this strong wind against the oppositions, the Uri Party successfully swept the majority seats at the election. It was the first time in South Korean history since democratization in 1987 that a single ruling party successfully won simple majority at a general election. The constitution court also sentenced violation of the constitution against the impeachment, and Roh returned to the seat of his president.

This kind of Roh Mu-hyun's leadership seems to be changing South Korean politics rapidly. Since democratization in 1987, the most important characteristic of South Korean politics is a rivalry of regionalisms between Kyongsam-do Province and Jeolla-do Province. Almost all seats at the parliament were occupied by two major parties which enjoyed monopolistic support from the regions, and these regionalistic rival parties had continued severe contest to get the post of the president.

However, this situation has changed after the birth of the Uri Party, because it could not get any monolithic support from any region. In Kyongsan-do, Grand National Party still keeps their monopolistic supports and in Jeolla-do Province, the Uri Party has to contest with Democratic Party. To make up for it, the Uri Party found stronger support in younger generations, especially, what they call 386 generation, the generation who were born in the 1960s.

Economically, Roh's government are never dependent on big Chaebols, Korean conglomerates. Rather, the government often opens negative

understandings against the Chaebols and repeats needs of reformation of South Korean economy which was under strong influence of the major conglomerates.

The government has more hostile relations against old journalisms. Especially, against major newspapers, including Chosun-Ilbo, Donga-Ilbo, and Jungang-Ilbo, Roh Mu-hyun openly criticizes them as ‘Speech Powers’ and repeats needs of ‘Journalism reformations’.

The question here is why Roh Mu-hyun and his government can continue this kind of ‘reformations’ against regionalisms, conglomerates and newspapers together. There are three key-words here. First key-word is globalization. As known very well, South Korea has successfully developed their economy with strong leadership of the government since the 1960s. The government strategically invested limited resources to the limited number of capitals, and the capitals had grown up to big conglomerates, along expansion of South Korean economy. However, in the age of globalization in the 1990s, the government gradually lost the control of the economy. This situation was led some conglomerates to lose economic performance, especially in case they were heavily dependent on the government. The financial crisis in the end of 1997 was a clear result of it. There, the government was forced to change their economic policies under the conditionality of IMF. Supports to collapsed conglomerates were stopped in one hand, and the government started new project to supports new business, including IT industries in the other hand. Roh’s government stands on this kind new economical situation.

Development of internet in South Korea is the second key. It is a result of the new efforts of the government to save their economy after the financial crisis but the impact was not limited to their economy. Very rapid development of internet gave people, especially people who had been excluded from public space like major

newspapers, chances to bring their message to the society directly with low cost. In this country, there were unique groups of elites, called 'Jae-ya', or outsiders, who rejected to be 'insiders' of the society, even after democratization in 1987. They believed that the democratization was not enough and so they had to continue their efforts to really 'democratize' their society. With a type of ideologies which was influenced by dependency theory, 'Jae-ya' people were forced to struggle for their movement without their own method to convey their messages to the society. But after the development of internet, they suddenly found their media there. They successfully expanded their movement through internet. Roh's government was supported by this kind of 'Jae-ya' elite strongly.

The third key-word is changes of international situation around South Korea since the 1990s. At the time of cold war, South Korea was forced to have friendly, but subordinate relationships with U.S. and Japan under strong threat from North. However, lost of serious threat from North after the end of cold war made South Korean people doubt this kind of subordinate relationships with U.S. and Japan. With emerging self-confidence about their nation by experiences of successful economic development, nationalistic atmosphere with anti-American and anti-Japanese sentiments was spread in the society and the atmosphere was easily connected to the socialistic message of the 'Jae-Ya' people. The end of cold war was more for South Korean society, because South Korea, correctly Republic of Korea, itself was a real product of the cold war. It brought serious doubt against legitimacy of Republic of Korea. There, the images of old major sectors, including parties, conglomerates, journalism, which had enjoyed privileged states in the society, were damaged.

In this meaning, Roh Mu-hyun's unique leadership was not only the product

of his own personality but more of the result of the situation around South Korea since the 1990s. We may find the similar situation in other Asian countries.