The Terminal Crisis of the “Participatory Government” and the Election of Lee Myung Bak

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the election of Lee Myung Bak through the terminal crisis of the Roh Moo Hyun government that preceded it. I start with an analysis of the election of Lee Myung Bak and the electoral strategies of the liberal-progressive bloc in the December 2007 election and then move on to detail how these strategies shed light on tensions within Korean progressive politics since the transition to democracy in 1987. These tensions inform what I shall call the “terminal crisis” of Roh’s “participatory government.” I argue that this crisis involves a problem of articulation within progressive politics between a politics of reunification and one grounded in egalitarian economic reform, including the lack of an alternative to the different forms of neo-liberalism embraced by both the Roh government and the conservative government of Lee Myung Bak. My hope is that thorough examination of these tensions that have informed the liberal-progressive bloc during the long decade since 1987 can spur reflection on the role of social movements in Korean democratisation and the dilemmas they face in crafting strategies for political and economic reform.

KEY WORDS: South Korea, neo-liberal reform, democratisation, nationalism, social movements, reunification

In Korean society there is nothing that demonstrates the salient characteristics of civil society than the status of the worker in it. Despite democratization, the world-wide ending of the Cold War, and the great softening of the relations of hostility and confrontation between North and South Korea, the workers still cannot organize themselves politically in Korea. There is no political party that workers can vote for as a class, and the interests and perspectives of the workers are not recognized as important agenda items in the public sphere. The fact that labor is not politically represented is an important factor that weakens civil society, and this has negative impact on the development of democracy (Choi Jang Jip, 2005: 268).

The vision of overcoming the “87 regime depends largely on what we consider to be the larger system of which the “87 regime is a subclass, and within what
more comprehensive scheme of periodization we place the post-1987 period. For instance, the argument... that the progress in political democracy since 1987 actually amounts to the failure of substantive democracy, accompanied as it was with the ascendancy of neoliberalism, represents a point of view that seeks to understand the South Korean society of the last twenty years mainly in terms of the “neoliberal phase” (beginning in the early 1980s) of the modern world-system... But... domestic progress in democracy has owed much of its success to factors like reunification movements at the civilian level, which never stopped even under the “53 regime, and to attempts at the government level to mitigate the North–South confrontation (Paik, Nak Jung, 2007).

In the December 2007 South Korean presidential elections, the conservative candidate Lee Myung-Bak, an ex-Hyundai construction CEO and former mayor of Seoul, nicknamed “the bulldozer” and noted for his pragmatic politics, won the presidential election by a clear majority, routing the rival conservative, liberal and progressive candidates on a campaign promising economic growth. Lee’s election platform was based around the “747 plan,” a plan to restore South Korea’s growth rate to 7% annual growth, and to make Korea a country with US$40,000 per capita income and the seventh-largest economy. Lee spoke directly to voter discontent with the tenure of President Roh Moo Hyun in which economic inequality had continued to widen and irregular, casual and temporary forms of work expanded; in addition, his campaign was able to exploit the ongoing disarray within the liberal-progressive and regional blocs that had supported Roh; all while Lee himself was being investigated for fraud and embezzlement charges by a special prosecutor. During the campaign, Lee’s Hannara or Grand National Party (GNP) nicknamed the decade of rule by the Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun governments – whom party stalwarts regarded as “leftist” or “pro-North” presidents – as a “lost decade” of diminished economic growth (Hankyoreh, 11 June 2007; Paik, 2007). Thus, conservatives proposed “pragmatic” policies that they claimed would lead to growth, such as the building of a cross-country canal system and the easing of regulations on the domestic conglomerates or chaebol – such as laws on the separation of financial from industrial capital, and laws preventing industrial development in the capital region that the previous government had introduced.

During his inauguration Lee emphasised that “we must move from the age of ideology into the age of pragmatism” and declared his presidency a post-ideological one (Chosun Ilbo, 26 February 2008). However, it seems that even conservatives within and outside of his party regard his orientation as conservative and dogmatically ideological. Celebrating Lee’s election, even the conservative US-based think-tank, the Heritage Foundation, applauded Lee as a conservative candidate with an “ideological mandate” and argued that his pragmatism is simply a rhetorical attempt to avoid association with the old guard in the GNP in order to attract younger voters (Klingner, 2008). Lee’s pragmatism was thus not so much a matter of principle or a see-what-works philosophy as much as it was the product of ideological vacillation between ultra-conservative and populist discourse that he could use to win the election. He fought his campaign discursively on these two levels: he promised populist reforms that would lead to a return to the kind of high economic growth seen previously during the Park Chung Hee dictatorship era and
connected this to ultra-conservative condemnation of the legacy of “leftist” presidents Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun (see Armstrong, 2008) which, in the views of the conservative right, had strained an otherwise close USA–Korea relationship, jeopardised national security by pursuing engagement with North Korea, and neglected economic development by attempting to reform the chaebol. However, the inclusion of some progressive activists into the ranks of presidential advisors and ruling party politicians notwithstanding, the Roh regime – as with the Kim Dae Jung government before it – adopted a wide range of neo-liberal economic policies and cannot, at the level of economic policy, be considered “leftist,” or even, in my view, anti-American, especially since both governments pursued deeper economic integration with the USA in the form of free trade agreements and financial liberalisation even if they did try to stake out, on a moderate basis, an independent policy in regard to North Korea. Making a political chimera out of previous reform governments, Lee proposed to mend the Korea–USA relationship and to jump start the economy with his grand canal project and promised both farmers and urban dwellers assistance, through a plan for credit card debtors and impoverished farmers to work out their debt and the building of more “new town” apartment complexes.

Soon after Lee’s election, and in the midst of the unfolding financial crisis relating to the credit crisis around sub-prime mortgages in the USA, Lee was forced to humble his 747 plan and it soon became clear that in substance his policies would not deliver the economic growth that they promised. In addition, the limits of Lee’s illusory pragmatism quickly became exposed as senior members of the GNP announced that they were going to eradicate the legacy of the “leftists,” starting with the ministries of Unification, Gender Equality and the National Human Rights Commission and thus began a long and still ongoing war of position and manoeuvre – involving downsizing, ministry closure and strategic appointments – within the state apparatus and state-owned enterprises. Thus, beyond a few populist strategies, and ones that veered quite dangerously toward future crises – such as Lee’s proposal to use funds from the national pension fund to pay off credit card debts (Kim Ji-hyun, 2008) or to dredge the nation’s rivers to push forward his canal plan against better scientific and economic judgement – there is little about Lee’s political conservatism that seemed hard to dispute by as early as the spring of 2008. At this time, many of those who had voted for Lee’s pragmatic rhetoric joined in some of the largest street demonstrations in 20 years to voice their discontent at his handling of a political crisis over the importation of US beef and proposals for a new round of extensive privatisation of public assets. Thus, within his first two months in office, the new president’s approval ratings dropped faster than any previous president and a crisis of conservative hegemony emerged, particularly since many of Lee’s “pragmatic” promises turned out to be illusory.

The catalyst for the protests against Lee Myung Bak was Lee’s quick negotiation of a deal with the USA to resume imports of US beef by eliminating many of South Korea’s existing quarantine procedures against meat containing bone fragments or other parts that carry a risk of infection from Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), commonly known as Mad-Cow Disease. This concession, viewed by many South Koreans to be a marker of an unfair deal, led to what were at first small protests but which escalated into the largest acts of civil disobedience since the June
Democratic Uprising in 1987, with almost one million people participating nationwide in the candlelight vigils on 10 June 2008 – the peak of nightly candlelight vigils that had continued for over two months. Part of the reason why the protest swelled was because Lee’s government sought to blame them on “leftist” or “hidden” forces, thus brandishing what were actually a hybrid mix of participants, including high school students and members of civil society groups, online clubs, clergy, and labour unions, with a label harkening back to the anticommunist dictatorship (Korea Beat, 18 May 2008). The approach failed miserably and Lee’s top aides and ministers subsequently resigned and the president himself apologized and promised to alter his policies as a result.

The protests against Lee’s policies, however, raised an important question among many in the South Korean liberal-progressive bloc. And that was that although the protests were successful in contesting something of the amplified neo-liberalism of Lee Myung Bak, South Korea’s political system still lacked a solid alternative to the neo-liberalism of the GNP. The Democratic Party formed from the ashes of Roh’s Uri Party lacked a strong progressive orientation on economic issues and, meanwhile, of the new parties of the left, the Democratic Labour Party has been tainted by factional infighting and remained small in stature in the National Assembly, while the New Progressive Party (which emerged out of the factional conflict in the DLP) did not win a single seat in the April 2008 general elections that had followed the Presidential election in December. Thus, many felt that even if Lee Myung Bak was to resign or new elections were called, a progressive alternative to his regime failed to exist in the current spectrum of party politics. The conservatives were losing hegemony on the economic front, but the liberal-progressive bloc had no ready-made alternatives to offer because its main electoral party had also strongly embraced neo-liberal policies during its time in office. In terms of trade and labour market policy, there were fewer differences between Roh’s and Lee’s parties than might seem the case, even if they did pursue qualitatively different brands of liberalisation in finance and corporate governance, with the Roh government stressing shareholder rights and attempting to control real estate speculation and the Lee government undoing restrictions on industrial capital and restrictions on real estate transactions and property development. While the liberal-progressive bloc was relatively united around the politics of reunification, the neo-liberalism of both Roh and the Kim Dae Jung government before him had had put stress on the already uneasy coalition of forces made up of intellectuals, politicians, social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that composed this bloc and which had emerged from the democracy movements of the 1980s. Thus, the particular brand of Kim and Roh’s neo-liberalism, tempered as it was with participation from civil society and advanced alongside the desire for reunification, made it problematic to unify the social forces that composed this bloc into a cohesive campaign for a clear economic alternative to the current regime.

What I would like to do in this paper is to examine some of the sources of this problem in terms of their basis within the relations between some of the domestic social forces that influenced the transition to democracy in 1987 and the uneasy alliances that made up the reform governments of Kim Dae Jung and Roh Moo Hyun. Specifically, I shall argue that a strategic tension exists between an emphasis on a capitalist versus a territorial logic of power that informs the organisation of
reform forces, and this is manifested as a tension between a politics of egalitarian economic reform and a politics of reunification. While these logics are intertwined, the tension between them, already apparent in the democracy movements of the 1980s, continues to inform the strategies of this historical bloc and creates tensions that make it difficult for these forces to put forward substantial alternatives to neoliberalism even though, at times, they have had a clear electoral mandate and state capacity to pursue alternative forms of economic restructuring. This tension is all the more important, because, nearly two years after the election of Lee Myung Bak, and in the midst of a global recession and environmental crisis which has raised serious questions about both neoliberalism and the export-oriented model, the quest for alternative economic frameworks that can sustain domestic demand and employment (as well as manage the environmental constraints of global warming) while also addressing the problem of reunification seems all the more urgent.

Furthermore, the problems of the liberal-progressive bloc constitute an interesting entry point into the study of neoliberal trajectories within South Korea. While many studies have attempted to explore neoliberalism by focusing on the, no doubt, tremendous pressure exerted by international institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank (Chossudovsky, 2003; Wade and Veneroso, 1998), this perspective only reveals some of the relationships, primarily the international ones, that have informed neoliberalism in South Korea to the neglect of more domestically situated social forces. It also does not explain why there was little reported conflict between Korean and IMF policy makers during the 1997 crisis (see, for example, Coe and Kim, 2002) and thus how neo-liberal policies became an easy fit before as well as during the crisis and after. The same argument can also be made for the analysis of political leadership; while the political and psychological attitudes of leaders such as Lee Myung Bak, Roh Moo Hyun and Kim Dae Jung have played a role in the assemblage of politics from which they emerged, it would be wrong to solely attribute the key turns toward neo-liberal policy simply to particular leaders without first understanding how such policy has been articulated within a relational context conducive to neo-liberal policy.

What I seek to do here, then, is to expand the relational horizon in which this transition has normally been studied to examine how neo-liberalism is not simply an institutional problem but also a strategic one that has been articulated with democratisation. This “double transition” (see Gray, 2008) represents a series of uneasy alliances within Korean politics that speak to the way in which neoliberalism works itself through locally situated relationships of social forces between state and civil society that are sometimes contradictory but that must be properly situated if potential alternatives to neoliberalism are to be explored and the articulation of neoliberalism through wider historical processes properly understood. Finally, this perspective should also provide a powerful corrective to more state-orientated studies, such as the developmental state perspective, which has largely neglected the creative role of political alliances and conflict in the process of state restructuring, especially at the grassroots level (see, for example, Fine, 2006), while also examining some of the specific problems and constraints that have hampered progressives in their attempts to transform Korean state strategies into something more socially democratic. Ironically, not much has been written from the developmental state perspective on contemporary Korean political economy because the post-crisis IMF
restructuring since 1997 has significantly done away with many of the vestiges of Korea’s developmental state, ushering in a more neo-liberalised configuration that one could call post-developmental – a term used in different contexts to describe the trajectory away from key policies of state-led development in both North and Southeast Asia (see Ong, 2006) – only for the sake that though the government no longer uses strong industrial policy measures, such as policy loans and licensing restrictions, to target new industries and to maintain high employment. Thus, industrial policy has waned, while the lack of welfare and equality that plagued the older model persists. One of the results of these changes has been the growth of inequality and irregular work alongside diminished economic growth compared to previous eras. Bubbles have plagued the economy and re-distribution measures have lagged behind widening inequality. The combined effect of these changes created a legitimacy crisis for progressive and liberal reform groups.

A Problem of Articulation

The problem of co-ordination within the liberal-progressive bloc at the level of both political and civil society, or, more specifically, at the point of intersection between the two, is a problem related specifically to the subordination of egalitarian reform to reunification and, as a strategic problem, is directly related to Korea’s post-war history as well as the way in which the liberal-progressive bloc has managed the transition to democracy. This is a point articulated by the public intellectual Choi Jang Jip in his 2005 book Democracy after Democratization, in which he advanced a theory of conservative democratisation. Choi argued that democratisation in Korea had been a conservative process that failed to include the interests of the labour movement and of everyday citizens – what Choi terms the “common people” (seomin) – into mainstream politics. “The rights, interests, and demands of common people,” Choi (2005: 306) argues, “cannot be realised in a democracy where the party system does not properly reflect and represent socio-economic conflicts and cleavages.” Without the inclusion of substantial demands and policy issues favouring workers and livelihood issues, Choi argues, political power remains sharply in the hands of an elite-led party system, the domestic conglomerates, economic bureaucracies and the executive branch compared to institutions of civil society and the social movements. The origins of this problem were to be found in the post-war history of South Korean politics, in which anti-communism and authoritarian industrialism came to dominate the political economic field, leaving the economy orientated towards pro-growth mobilisation and political society – through the suppression of ideological competition – dominated by conservative interests with only regional rivalry to provide the basis for political competition. Though the democratic transition dulled the impact of anti-communism and facilitated the expansion of civil society, the range of political competition remained narrow and the neo-liberal policy orientations of both reform-orientated and conservative governments have had the effect of marginalising the electorate, and undermining the labour movement from viable participation in the political sphere. At the heart of the democratisation process, then, lay the unresolved politics of economic reform and thus a failure to resolve the path-dependent problem of elite power.
Written largely out of discontent with the Kim Dae Jung regime, in which he participated as a presidential policy advisor, Choi, in the afterword to the English edition of his book, argues that the problem of conservative democratisation continued into the recent Roh Moo Hyun regime (see also Choi, 2007). Roh’s “participatory government,” like Kim Dae Jung’s “participatory economy,” included many former democracy movement activists and reform forces that had come to political maturity in the democracy and student movements of the 1980s. These reformers had ambitious plans but, except for the “Sunshine policy” of engagement with North Korea, many reform projects became stalled after the election due to ongoing scandals and proceedings by the opposition conservative party as well as members of the president’s own Millennium Democratic Party to impeach Roh in 2004. In the midst of large candlelight vigils in support of Roh, a general election was called and Roh’s newly formed Uri Party (Our Open Party) won by a clear majority and impeachment charges against the president were dropped. It appeared to progressives that they had a clear mandate; however, they failed to act on it. Soon after the election, Roh’s policy choices began to alter from the course that he set out. The decision to send troops to Iraq, the breakdown of social dialogue in labour-management-governments negotiations over labour market reform, and the announcement of a Korea–USA free trade deal alienated the president’s support base among a number of social movements and civil society groups; furthermore, due to low public opinion ratings, his attempt to form what he termed a “grand coalition” with the conservative Grand National Party alienated many of his core personnel of liberal reformers in his Uri Party, and, by the summer of 2007, Roh’s ruling government party had split into moderate, progressive and conservative factions.

In reaction to the criticism that by embracing a neo-liberal policy orientation he was following the wrong path, Roh accused his critics of “inflexible progressivism,” signalling Choi out in particular but also other prominent critics from the progressive bloc, including some of his former political advisors who had become increasingly vocal in their criticisms of Roh government policies, such as concessions made in the negotiation of a Korea–USA Free Trade Agreement (KorUS FTA) and U-turns away from social co-operation and market regulation that had formally been embraced by Roh (Korea Times, 17 February 2007; Lee Jeong Woo, 2006). This tension spilled over into the 2007 presidential election campaign and the debate over conservative democratisation continued as progressive intellectuals debated which direction the progressive forces should take in the campaign. A split existed between those who argued that a unified liberal-progressive political party should base its campaign on opposition to neo-liberal restructuring and another camp that emphasised the continuation of the Sunshine Policy – the policy of reconciliation with North Korea that had been begun by Kim Dae Jung and carried on by Roh Moo Hyun – articulated with a centrist economic policy as the political basis of a coalition of reform forces.

The debate that ensued was not simply about electoral strategy but was a struggle over the contested memory of 1987, and the extent to which claims for national reunification could be divorced from other claims for political and economic equality. Paik Nak Jung, another senior intellectual of the progressive movement and a critic of Choi Jang Jip’s theory of conservative democratisation, waded into
the debate on the side of the pro-Roh forces. Paik criticised Choi’s theory of conservative democratisation and his opposition to Roh’s neo-liberal policies and argued that the end of the division system – the partition of the peninsula by separate regimes begun in 1945 that, Paik (2007) argues, took on a systemic status after the Korea War – should be the first priority of progressive forces:

[T]here is a prevalent sense of crisis in Korea today that the so-called ‘87 regime that was formed after June 1987 has now reached its limit and is in need of a new breakthrough. While searching for an answer, some analysts offer a diagnosis that although formal and procedural democracy was achieved through the June Struggle, substantive democracy in the economic and social fields has remained inadequate or has even suffered a retreat. This view grasps only part of the truth and we must beware of such a facile dichotomy . . . Going beyond such one-sidedness is an important task for us as we commemorate the 20th anniversary of the June Struggle . . . In the period of tyrannical rule by the government of a divided nation, mere advocacy of the principle of peaceful and autonomous reunification or of an egalitarian society, or the immediate struggle for basic civil rights could serve to shake the division system. However, with the end of military dictatorship and the newly opened space for more substantive endeavours, the need arose for a centrist line that could incorporate the various agendas of various forces with a view to a clearly conceived goal of transforming the division system. Close to twenty years later, Korea now finds itself in an even more urgent need of a line focused on radical transformation in this sense and broadly centrist in practice (Paik Nak Jung, 2007).

What we see here is an important matter of emphasis between a capitalist and territorial logic of power. Although these logics are intertwined, a greater stress is often put on one or another, rather than a logic of equivalence that can sufficiently address both logics in a way that addresses egalitarian demands.³ Thus, for Paik, the problem of neo-liberalism is viewed more as a subset to the division system than as a problem to be co-articulated as equal in importance to reunification. It also speaks to a second distinction between a politics that is more often based on an ethnic identity than on civic and economic justice, though Paik himself has tried to keep a critical tension between the two in his thought, even if it is the former that dominates (see Paik, 1993; 1996).⁴ Thus, the subtle subordination of these priorities to one another is a problem of both articulation and co-ordination among reform forces. The promotion of a centrist political platform was seen by Paik and others of the reform bloc as a necessary hegemonic manoeuvre based on the assumption that reunification would be a more unifying political platform if untethered from progressive economic reform. But, strategically, this move failed, as the economic front was vacated and left as a site that conservative forces were able to occupy rather aggressively, while dividing the liberal-progressive bloc.

As Roh’s Uri Party broke up, a coalition was formed around the United New Democratic Party (later to become the Democratic Party), which evolved out of this factional infighting, and embraced much of Paik’s position (indeed Paik was instrumental in attempting to get progressive forces to unify behind a single candidate). It entered the 2007 elections on the same policy lines as the Roh
government but with perhaps even less emphasis on redistributive reform. The conservative Grand National Party, on the other hand, promising a return to the high growth years of the late dictator Park Chung Hee, won the election by a landslide. What was ultimately at stake in this debate among progressive forces was the chance to put forward a viable alternative to the division system that does not exchange its priority as a matter of foreign policy for further neo-liberal reform. Unfortunately, no party of the liberal-progressive bloc effectively resolved these concerns.

The “Long Decade” after 1987

The origin of this frustration experienced by progressive elements in the December 2007 elections can be understood by tracing some of the background power relations between groups that influenced the transition to free elections in 1987 and remain unresolved in the sorts of interactions and political projects that they have engaged in since then. That the tension between a national project of reunification and egalitarian economic reform have continued to inform the organisation of progressive forces in South Korea since 1987 makes the period between the democratic uprisings of 1987 and the unravelling of the Roh government something of a long decade, in as much as the terminal problems of the Roh governments, particularly the disintegration of that regime into competing tendencies, speak to political tensions whose historical trajectories exceed the mere decade of rule by liberal-progressive governments from 1997-2007 and which thus must be situated in the longer trajectory of democratisation since the June Uprising. In the re-composition of social forces on the peninsula that have occurred since then, participants in social movements, political parties, civil society groups and business have been faced with the task of rearticulating the radical demands of the 1980s movements under the considerably more open political situation brought about by the transition to free elections and subsequent expansion and reconfiguration of civil society from opposition movements to more complex associations with considerable influence on political society. None the less, many of the groups that came out of the more grassroots social movements that influenced the 1987 events had their sights set on ambitious reform of the cold war division system and a solution to the lack of thorough economic and political democracy at home, and thus it is important to understand what has become of these projects and how they continue to inform the contemporary negotiation of political power on the peninsula.

The 1980s movements were composed of a number of disparate groups of workers, students, citizens and intellectuals loosely organised into a broad based movement known as the Minjung movement. Though these movements pursued several forms of organisation – from the establishment of progressive political parties to underground networks of blacklisted students-cum-workers who pursued union mobilisation and educated workers about their rights and the structure of the dictatorship, to the creation of local campaigns for democratic government – they operated under the general oppositional framework of the Minjung movement. Thus, the workers’, feminist, and peace movement largely articulated their claims within the three principles (Sammin Jooui) of the Minjung movement: anti-imperialist nationalism (Minjok), democracy (Minju), and democratic-populism (Minjung).
As Gi-Wook Shin (2002; 2006) has noted, the Minjung movement had inflections of ethnic nationalism in that the Korean people were often conceptualised as a particular form of ethnos forming a divided nation. However, I would argue that the concept of the Minjung puts emphasis primarily on the subaltern sufferings of popular classes and thus has a looser connotation of “oppressed masses” than a firmly nationalist limitation. While ethnic nationalist articulations of Minjung subjectively were and are quite prevalent among reunification activists, it would be wrong to conclude that the entire Minjung movement subscribed to ethnic nationalism. Instead I would argue that Minjung identity provided something of a looser frame under which these struggles became understood, even if some elements of the movement adopted an ethnically nationalist understanding of Minjung subjectivity.6

While there was a regional basis to mainstream opposition politics and an inclination towards market democracy in Kim Dae Jung’s political thought, it was mostly the radical ideas of two key tendencies within the Minjung movements that animated the grassroots social movements. These were loosely termed NL and PD after the terms National Liberation and People’s Democracy, which constituted two radical poles of the progressive movement; although, between them, there were many variations of these perspectives. In general, however, the development of both trajectories of radical thought came out of the debates in the early 1980s about the nature of Korean capitalism. One sect (NL) believed that the division of the peninsula by foreign powers was the main issue thwarting democratic development on the peninsula and thus pursued unification as its primary political goal, while the other (PD) put the emphasis on the domestic configuration of capitalism and the establishment of a worker-friendly peoples’ democracy as the priority to be addressed first, before considering re-unification. Some in the NL line tended to look more in favour of the regime to the North, while PD remained generally much more agnostic (Park, 2005). Thus, one can see here two competing solutions to problems of Korean political economy; one that put the emphasis on the territorial interests of states and of imperialism, and another that highlighted the capitalist dynamics of state power.

Many of the young student and labour activists whose protest culminated in the transition to electoral rule in June 1987, many of whom participated in the “Great Worker Struggle” in the subsequent months – Korea’s own “Hot Autumn,” if you will – were influenced in part by strains of the NL and PD, and embraced goals such as the end of the division system, and the expansion of socialist democracy on the peninsula. However, the actual transfer of power brought about by the Democratic Uprising of 1987 was mediated by constitutional amendments and the organisation of free elections by the members of the established regime and the oppositional political parties; thus, a different politics came to animate the immediate transition other than that of the radical social movements. Choi (2005) described the transition as a passive revolution in that the transition was managed by the elite through accommodating, partially, some of the demands of the democracy movement. The immediate result of the transition was that the link between the political elite and the state administration was opened up to political competition. However, with the election of Roh Tae Woo, the economic and political elite of the old regime, as well as the existing state administration, retained power and, as Armstrong (2008) notes,
the central instruments of the repressive dictatorships were retained including the National Security Law and the key agency for its enforcement: the Korean Central Intelligence Agency. Thus, for the first two regimes after 1987 (Roh Tae Woo and Kim Young Sam) decision making remained largely in the hands of the economic elite and state administration, many of whom had been in favour of a transition to market democracy since at least the early 1980s (Kim Yun Tae, 1999), while the old political elite underwent recomposition under the government of Kim Young Sam, whose political party was formed by a compromise between former oppositional party members and members of the old regimes. None the less, the June democratic uprising ensured that the old regime could not fully recuperate and, while the immediate transition was rather limited, it secured an expansion of political space for civil society, even if the social movements of the 1980s were not immediately able to directly occupy the field of official decision making in the immediate aftermath of the transition.

From Civil to Political Society

After nearly thirty years of military rule, however, civil society groups were poorly developed at the institutional level and unable to advocate a strong alternative to the mandates of the dominant political parties. As Kim Ho-Gi (2005) points out, the transition to free elections and the collapse of the Soviet Union left progressive forces in disarray, but they soon reformulated their strategies and activists began to work through several fronts at once: the labour movement, the political parties and civic organisations. Soon after the 1987 transition, activists from the democracy movement began to create and expand civil society organisations. Organised together in the Korean Council of Citizen’s Movements, groups such as the Citizen’s Coalition for Economic Justice, Korean Federation for Environmental Movement and the Korean Women’s Associations United set their sights on reforming Korean political economy and the many social, political, environmental, regional and gendered biases of the developmental period. Some of these groups promoted shareholder activism and corporate governance reform to improve the transparency and accountability of Korean business, while others, including the People’s Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), which was founded in 1994 to bridge the gap between NGOs and the mass movements, worked on eliminating political corruption by monitoring electoral politics and promoting better state regulation of industry as well as strategic investments in social welfare, arts and culture, and reform of the education system in order to address past inequalities. Meanwhile, others advocated and pursued projects for peaceful engagement and reunification with North Korea, especially the student movement. However, even though they had switched from revolutionary action to the development of civil society, political parties and post-Marxism (see Jung, Y.-T., 2000; Yi Jin-kyung, 2006), the priorities of the 1980s movements continued to inform progressive political practice even though the switch to civil society-based movements often entailed an implicit critique of revolutionary action.

As Kim Dong Choon (2006) has pointed out, in contrast to the people’s movements (minjung undong) of the 1980s, the citizen’s movement (simin undong) entailed an implicit compromise about the limits of political participation in the
sense that the efforts of civil society were concerned with changing and acting within the existing field of the law; whereas, the 1980s people’s movements were aligned in overcoming the existing state of dictatorship through mass mobilisation and collective politics rather than explicitly concerned with the construction of new legal frameworks or advocacy networks. None the less, it would be wrong to conclude that civil society organisations were not concerned with comprehensive societal transformation even if their forms of mobilisation had been transformed. However, the expansion of civil society has entailed a different politics of mobilisation and participation than that of the mass movements. Thus, as Kim argues, the civic movement has suffered from a recent crisis of diminishing participants because of the tendency of students and intellectuals from the democracy movement to become professionalised in NGOs rather than pursuing mass mobilisation as they once did. Thus, Kim remarks, the constituency of the new civil movements has become smaller and is less likely to adopt mass mobilisation as a political tactic. In addition, civil society groups also have limited resources and receive little funding, which also limits their ability to mobilise. The more limited focus on monitoring and policy advocacy speaks, in many ways, both to the way in which the transition was negotiated by the elite, by keeping mass organisations out of power, and to some of the limitations faced by civil society organisations as the mass movements of the 1980s were demobilised.

To expand their influence, progressive civil society organisations became more active in attempting to reform political society not only on the outside, through election monitoring and the creation of voter lists (Kim Sun-Hyuk, 2003), but also by supplying reform-orientated governments with policy advisors. The government of Roh Moo Hyun, in particular, was staffed with a number of former democracy and labour activists as advisors and ministers and cultivated a closer connection with the feminist movement, economic reform NGOs and the shareholders rights movement (Lee Yeonho, 2005: 296; Cho Dae-yop, 2006: 75; Jang and Lim, 2006). The positions that reformers have taken up have often been as presidential advisors, policy planners, heads of presidential commissions, but also ministry posts, positions within government-sponsored research institutes, and even the post of prime minister in the case of veteran feminist and democracy movement activist Han Myoung Sook. However, fewer reformers have been located in the career administration posts in key economic ministries, which has posed certain problems in getting progressive policy enacted, especially in areas concerning distribution of the wealth and transparency in the corporate sector. Thus, while progressive reformers in the Kim and Roh regimes made progress on engagement with the North, they found their ability to increase social welfare muted by disagreement over how exactly to continue to restructure the Korean political economy.

The politics of reunification, then, had a much easier institutional realisation under Kim and Roh than have the politics of economic reform. This should be no surprise as egalitarian economic reform was always a more problematic component of the liberal-progressive alliance, and has remained generally subaltern to the liberalising concerns of reform governments. None the less, promotion of economic equality has been a key aspiration of this bloc and, especially at the point of integration where civil society and political society have converged under the Roh and Kim regimes, the thwarting of this aspiration has a played a critical role in
fragmenting the unity of reform forces in both political and civil society. As Choi Jang Jip (2005), who was the Chairman of the Presidential Policy Planning Committee for Kim’s first year in office, complains, while Kim Dae Jung had proposed the parallel development of democracy and a market economy, no comprehensive plan was implemented for restructuring the state administration and the chaebol in such a way that could include the broad participation of social forces such as labour and civil society. While Kim did introduce the “big deal” of product swaps between industry, minimal expansion of welfare, and casualisation of the labour contract, during the financial crisis, this was done in a way that was constrictive to labour’s interests and allowed the further concentration of economic power in the hands of both the domestic conglomerates and foreign and domestic shareholders. Meanwhile, key posts in the state administration, particularly the Ministry of Finance and Economy, remained in the hands of neo-liberal policy makers, with little progressive input. This is not to say that social movements and civil society did not suggest particular reforms: some of their suggestions, particularly around shareholder rights, were certainly accepted by the government and put into practice by newer ministries such as the Fair Trade Commission. However, further thought of how a broad coalition of forces could be used to substantively reorientate both the Korean economy and political society, through either a more open tripartite process (which has so far been used only to get labour to accept restructuring rather than involve it in a more expansive compromise) or other participatory and redistributinal means, seemed off the table. Liberal forces from Kim’s party were hesitant to propose much else; perhaps because of their basis in the impoverished southwest, which was bypassed by heavy industrialisation, they had embraced the desire to valorise small and medium-sized enterprise and limit government intervention. There was also the influence of economic liberalism on Kim’s own thought, which included the promotion of a liberal market economy as seen in his Mass-Participatory Economy manifesto and which was not necessarily hostile to attitudes of the central economic bureaucracies (Kim Dae-Jung, 1996). Since the 1980s, these bureaucracies had been staffed with neo-liberal economists educated in Chicago-style economics and monetarism, who, in their own way, also saw their economics as a promotion of democracy on the peninsula (Kim Yun Tae, 1999).

The Terminal Crisis of the Participatory Government

Things were supposed to be different in the government of Roh Moo Hyun, but, as discussed above, the tension between a politics of reunification and egalitarian economic reform found themselves articulated at probably their most problematic level. Roh was human rights lawyer and had a strong self-image as a member of the progressive bloc, using his extensive networks with oppositional social movements from the democracy movement era to expand consultation with civil society groups in policy formation. Thus, like its predecessor, the Roh government came into office with ambitious reforms plans and a cadre of younger reform-orientated politicians and advisors set to re-orientate Korean politics. However, once in power, progressive reformers, especially those that had made the transition from civil society to political society by joining Roh’s participatory government, suffered defeat in most of their policy areas and reversed their course on others, leading to tension between
progressive reformers in Roh’s government and ruling party, as well as between his
government and reform movements and NGOs, like the umbrella People’s Solidarity
for Participatory Democracy, as well as the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions
(KCTU) and other sectoral groups. As under Kim Dae Jung’s government, this
nexus between civil and political society seemed more useful in legitimising the
participatory government, rather than being used to pursue extensive plans to
improve the process of democratic participation by introducing substantive demands
and reform plans.

While progressive reformers in the regime made progress on engagement with the
North, they found their ability to increase social welfare and redistribution measures
muted by both an economic bureaucracy hostile to creative reforms, political
factions within the ruling bloc constituted by more neo-liberal and regional forces,
and confusion over how exactly to restructure the Korean model. These problems
were further exacerbated by Roh’s gradual embrace of neo-liberal reforms, such as
the continued privatisation of banks and utilities, the proliferation of bilateral free
trade agreements and his abandonment of social co-operation with the unions in
favour of labour market reform and punitive practices against illegal strikes, such as
the expansion of damage claims against individual unions by both the government
and private sector (Doucette, 2005; Gray, 2008). While some blamed the lack of
progress on economic reform on Roh’s own political immaturity, it was rather a
path-dependent problem because Roh’s ruling bloc was already a hybrid
composition of liberal and progressive forces with no clear agreement on substantive
redistribution and reform of economic administration beyond the minimalist welfare
regime established under Kim Dae Jung and reform of real estate and education
policy. While united around reunification policy, this hybrid bloc lacked unity on
exactly what redistributionary measures or form of inclusion of the labour
movement into civil and political society was desirable. This much was also
witnessed in the tense debate within civil society organisations, such as PSPD, and
the division between industrial policy advocates, shareholders rights movement, and
the labour movement that was evident in them.

As a result of Roh’s neo-liberal turn, key policy advisors and party members
began to quit and openly criticise his regime, especially following the
announcement of negotiations for a Korea-US FTA, which progressive reformers
within the Roh administration felt betrayed by as the effects of heightened
competition and structural adjustment brought on by the FTA would impede the
development of an adequate social security system. Prior to the completion of
US-Korea FTA negotiations, in an editorial in the daily Hankyoreh, Lee Jeong
Woo, former chairman of Roh’s presidential commission on policy planning,
directly singled out Roh’s policies as a continuation of the growth-first politics of
prior regimes.

The “Participatory Government” of Roh Moo-hyun has, over the last four
years, worked in its own way to overcome a culture where “growth is
everything” and “the market rules above all,” and I praise it for its efforts. The
results have been a greater emphasis on harmony between growth, the re-
distribution of wealth and the role of the public sector. Now, however, it is
saying that it is suddenly going to trash that philosophy and go back to the
familiar priorities of growth and the market. Put simply, it has turned to the right, and there ahead lies the cliff. Right now what is right for Korea is a greater turn towards the left. It is the Scandinavian social democratic model that has been judged the best of all the market economy experiments the human race has experienced so far. In public opinion surveys as well, it is the Scandinavian model that Koreans say they like the most. Though of course it would be difficult to move to that model right away, we should be gazing toward Scandinavia to get there. A free trade agreement with the U.S. means we are going to go in the wrong direction (Lee Jeong-woo, 2007; see also Lee Jeong-woo, 2006).

By the end of Roh’s term, most of the progressives who advocated progressive economic reform had resigned or had been forced out, and they criticised the regime for increasingly silencing dissent through laws limiting protest against the US-Korean FTA. None the less, a loose coalition of legislators held up the party in the national assembly until the 2007 presidential elections.

In anticipation of the autumn 2007 presidential election, many of the “pro-government” forces remaining in the national assembly grouped together under the banner of the United New Democratic Party in an effort to put forth a single candidate, but, internally, they remained relatively divided into rival sets of ideas and strategies on where to go with future policy. Others joined the start-up Creative Korea Party led by Moon Kook Hyun which campaigned on a loosely defined social corporatism. In practice, the “pro-government” forces left over from the Uri Party only remained united on the issue of continued peaceful engagement with the North, but none the less, attempts were made to present a cohesive alternative to Lee Myung Bak in the presidential race. To make their case, liberal forces argued that a unified front against the conservatives must be made in the election in order to avert a transition to conservative rule that they feared would isolate North Korea and roll back the clock on peace efforts that had only recently begun to look more stable following the inter-Korean summit in October 2007 and progress in the six party talks. Therefore, politicians and intellectuals associated with the broad liberal-left bloc argued that the basis of unity here must be an advancement of a pro-engagement policy rather than an alternative economic vision, as liberal and progressive forces were more deeply divided on what such a vision should be. Thus, the main call from the liberal camp was for a democratic centrist in opposition to conservative rule, rather than a nuanced and social-democratic alternative economic programme. However, since the rival conservative bloc chose to fight the election on the economic front, the liberal progressive bloc was not able to offer a substantive alternative to Lee Myung Bak’s proposals to restore economic growth. It seems then, that there was a missed opportunity here to articulate a more distinct logic of equivalence between reunification and egalitarian economic reform.

None the less, in the lead up to elections key pro-engagement intellectuals took stabs back at those progressives who chose not to remain in the party of pro-government forces which supported the pro-engagement priorities of the liberal reform bloc, asking if continued opposition to the FTA and the fight against neoliberalism should be the key priorities of the progressive movement:
The point, however, is whether such a configuration augurs well for overcoming the ‘87 regime. The strengthening of the more radical progressive camp(s) in such an alignment will not be without its positive meanings. But there is an acute risk that an easy electoral victory for the conservative opposition, plus the existence of radical sects satisfied with mere quantitative expansion, may prolong and further embitter the downward slide of the ‘87 regime in its final days. Precisely at this moment when room for unprincipled “middle of the road reformists” has shrunk due to the conclusion of the FTA negotiations, we should bring about a regrouping of forces for progressive reform with “radical centrism” as their main tenet – without of course, necessarily holding on to the term as an electoral slogan (Paik, 2007).

The lack of a solid economic front to liberal and progressive campaigns allowed conservative forces to rob the bloc of some of its fire by tentatively supporting pro-engagement policies and outflanking on the economic front through populist appeals, though not, of course, without internal tension within its own ranks. This points to limitations on the left nationalist line that a conservative president would necessarily lead to the renewal of territorial conflict. Even after the election of Lee Myung Bak, progress, though shaky, has been made in the tensions between the USA and North Korea, even if peninsular relations have become icier. Engagement projects, such as the Kaesong Industrial Complex, have also continued, albeit in a rocky fashion, being used as a site of political opportunism by both North Korea and conservative forces in the South.

A Double Fracture?

The tensions in the pro-government forces have also been articulated at a more grassroots level between forces that remained outside the centrist political coalition of the United New Democratic Party. These forces have attempted to form an independent alternative to the liberal ruling parties through the nexus of the democratic trade union movement, the KCTU, and the Democratic Labour Party, which was started by progressive unionists in the late 1990s, but which has been haunted by division as well. While the Democratic Labour Party advocated a progressive stance on economic issues in the 2007 election, its leadership’s rival nationalist orientation and somewhat antiquated silence on North Korean human rights issues overshadowed their policy proposals and cast opposition to existing neo-liberal arrangements with a more foreign policy inflection than with a comprehensive alternative economic platform. It performed so poorly in the 2007 presidential election that a schism broke out in the party between the Equality faction (on the PD side of the spectrum) and its nationalist leadership. The result has been public criticism of the nationalist leadership of the DLP and the creation of the New Progressive Party. However, as a new and unknown political force founded just a month before the spring 2008 national assembly elections, the NPP failed to elect any of the candidates they fielded from local grassroots workers, feminist and anti-discrimination movements.

This final schism points to a double fracture within the liberal progressive bloc occurring at both the level of political society and civil society. With supporters of
the ruling parties of Roh Moo Hyun and Kim Dae Jung divided between egalitarian economic reform and national unification as political priorities, and a further split at the grassroots level of civil society between the nationalist labour movement bloc around the DLP with its rival nationalist inflection to economic issues and foreign policy and a grassroots progressive bloc grouped around the New Progressive Party and small labour and media organisations pursuing a broad-based mobilisation of irregular workers, low-income residents threatened by development, and other marginalised groups. Like the fracture within the pro-government forces over economic reform, this double fracture is largely the result of what seems to be a split over whether or not Roh Moo Hyun’s foreign policies, such as participation in the Iraq war and the Korea-US FTA, could be supported as elements of reunification programme. The division was thus between those who saw Roh’s policies as a necessarily evil for room to pursue engagement with the North and those who could not offer their consent to such projects. That the Korea-USA relationship would provoke such a rupture within the left is due to the fact that it is located precisely on the fault line between egalitarian economic reform and reunification, with the result that the deferral of one side of the equation, such as the deferral of economic concerns when dealing with territorial ones or vice versa, in order to put emphasis on the other has led to further division amongst progressive forces. The irony of this was not easily disguised, and Yi Jin-kyoung and Ko Byeong-gweon, intellectuals from the Suyu group, a collective of former democracy movement intellectuals involved in the anti-FTA campaign, were quick to point this out as early as April 2006. They openly criticised what seemed to be the fundamental problem of taking the nation as the starting point for politics and leaving out the question of economic reform. Opposed to both empire and neo-liberalism, which are synonymous in their concerns, they saw the strategic compromises made by the pro-Roh reformers as problematic for oppositional politics and predicated the split to come:

... some activist groups in South Korea, whose identity is characterized by “national liberation,” are not leading the anti-U.S. movement, but standing by the government’s decision with “conditional support” at a time that calls for the strongest anti-US movement. They are willing to support a decision that allows the North Korean economy to find a way out, even if it means signing the U.S.-South Korea FTA ... Those who took an anti-U.S. stance in the name of the nation and unification are now standing by the U.S. for the same cause. How can we understand this strange irony? If this is taken further, US-South Korea FTA may cause a rupture within the nationalist camps. How can we be certain that there will not be two nationalist dispositions: one, that of anti-U.S. and the other, that of a re-unification movement. In this case, U.S.-Korea FTA will also be remembered as the starting point that caused the nationalist camp to stir and split ... Our struggle should not be limited by the faded national liberation struggle, because it is not desirable to interpolate the nation as a subject of struggle. As it has been pointed out before, the ambiguous position that some nationalist groups are taking can be a potential threat to the struggling front. If the reasons we are protesting the FTA with the U.S. focuses on national pride or national independence, our protest will undoubtedly lose its course when
issues such as the North-South Korea summit meetings, North-South Korean economic negotiations, or the six-party talks come up (Yi and Ko, 2006: 7; see also Cho Hee Yeon, 2007).

Yi and Ko’s statements proved prophetic as reunification trumped progressive economic reform within the pro-government forces and a left-nationalist bloc held the leadership of the DLP, without a strongly progressive focus both groups failed to organise an adequate campaign on the economic front. This left key issues of economic reform in the hands of conservatives until the 2008 general elections. In the end, both the UDP and DLP shrunk and were defeated in both the presidential election and the general election which followed, and progressives ended up in further disarray, dispersed by a double fracture across four political parties, and across factional lines.

Conclusion

Overall, what was at stake in these debates about political strategy on the Korean liberal-left is the understanding of not only what it means to be progressive in terms of potential economic reforms that can be made to the Korean economy, but also the chance to put forward a viable alternative to the division system that does not exchange its priority as a matter of foreign policy for further neo-liberal reform. Unfortunately, no party of the liberal-progressive bloc effectively resolved these concerns. In the end a larger coalition remained around pro-engagement candidates, but Lee Myung Bak won the election and the “participatory government” dissolved back into some of the competing tensions from which it arose.

In this paper, I have tried to highlight some of the reasons for the crisis of the Roh government and the awkward embrace of neo-liberalism by the liberal-progressive bloc that constituted it. I have argued that the twin problems of the radical democracy movements – the problem of the division regime and of an economic alternative to neo-liberalism and developmental authoritarianism – remain as a source of tension for the Korean left, impeding greater co-ordination of progressive groups and the articulation of a politics that neither embraces neo-liberal reform nor refuses peaceful engagement as part of its strategy. Ultimately this a problem of articulation, of how to put forth a politics of equivalence between reunification and egalitarian economic reform, not to mention other democratic demands from gender equality to environmental justice which I have not had time to explore fully here. At the moment it seems, however, that the priority of the division system within a liberal-progressive strategy has inhibited a more coherent articulation of economic policy, to the peril of fuelling employment precariousness and voter discontent. However, to return to the crisis of conservative hegemony discussed at the beginning, the recent protests against the Lee Myung Bak government may provide a potential reorientation of these politics.

Commenting on the 2008 protests against Lee Myung Bak’s agreement with the USA to relax South Korea’s quarantine regulations, a number of progressive scholars and activists pointed out that, in the absence of a functioning representative system where diverse ideological viewpoints could be voiced, grassroots mobilisation was an important site for politics, with the potential not only to revitalise
mainstream political competition but also to draw a more varied set of new social actors into the political realm through grassroots mobilisation concerned with “everyday-life politics” (saenghwal chongj’i). In this sense, the relationship between movements and the parties might undergo a transition that would be favourable to the kind of representative democracy with a broadened political competition that Choi Jang Jip has advocated. However, commenting that it was not obvious that the protests would necessarily revitalise representative politics, Choi himself remarked that instead of mobilisation, what was needed was a more straightforward attempt to revitalise party politics:

I can’t accept both the conservative viewpoint that the government of President Lee Myung-bak could be run aground due to the candlelight rallies and the progressive viewpoint that sees the candlelight protests as a good thing. As they include elements of a direct democracy, participants in the rallies are hoping for an ideal democratic system, but I think representative democracy is the best system. I am interested in restoring party politics or building a system of representative democracy based on revitalization, thereby reducing the roles of various movements (Choi Jang Jip quoted in Kang, 2008).

Choi’s apprehension was perhaps justified as, when the regime conceded on protestors’ demands for renegotiation of the beef deal with the USA and restored a number of South Korea’s quarantine regulations, protests began to die down, and a greater institutionalisation of the protests beyond the trade deal and the evocative civil disobedience that accompanied it was difficult to ascertain. While new grassroots coalitions have been formed, a wider renovation of party politics has yet to occur, though I would not foreclose the possibility that grassroots mobilisation may indeed help revitalise political parties. However, over a year later there remains to be significant change. Finally, Roh’s suicide on 23 May 2009 during an ongoing corruption probe seems set to reorientate the politics of the liberal-progressive bloc even further as both the political intentions of the government’s probe and the legacy of Roh’s government are further debated. Thus, whether or not progressive groups and liberal reformers will be able to forge ahead and address future changes with a new approach remains to be seen, though the victories for the Democratic party, but especially the New Progressive Party, in the April 2009 by-election show that progressive forces have a chance of once again mounting significant political challenges. However, as I have tried to show in this essay, the ability to do so will have to entail better co-ordination in dealing with the internal contradictions of the liberal-progressive bloc and putting forward a politics that can jointly articulate substantive democratic demands. Doing so seems to be an urgent task if both the goals of the long decade after the 1987 movements are to be resolved and the terminal crisis of Roh’s participatory government overcome.

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Notes

1 The remnants of the Uri Party were first organised into the United New Democratic Party, and then the United Democratic Party, before finally changing their name to the Democratic Party after the election.

2 Part of the research for this essay comes from a series of interviews I conducted in South Korea between May 2006 and 2007 among members of the liberal-progressive bloc while I was a visiting research fellow at the Institute for the Study of Democracy and Social Movements at Sungkonghoe University, Seoul. Apparently much of the conflict between Korea and the IMF centred around Korea’s desire for a state-owned asset management company versus a privately owned one.

3 I borrow the understanding of articulation and hegemony here from Laclau and Mouffe (1985), but temper their discursive reading of hegemony with a focus on the historical co-ordination of reform forces.

4 For the debate between Paik and Habermas in the New Left Review during the 1990s, see Paik (1993; 1996) and Habermas (1996).

5 While the terms “long decade” and “terminal crisis” resonate with Giovanni Arrighi’s concepts in his (1994) The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of our Times, I use them in this article to denote a trend in a political process and the unravelling of a political regime, whereas Arrighi’s work is focused on exploring the cyclical dynamics and spatial shifts of territorial power and capital accumulation.

6 One can also trace a parallel between a Minjung literature examining division of the peninsula and one concerned with the everyday struggles of urban dwellers; both come under the heading Minjung literature but one is much more concerned with the understanding of national division than the other. See also Wells (1995) and Koo (2001).

7 In recent years philanthropic institutions, such as the Beautiful Foundation and the Hope Institute, have been established to fund diverse initiatives by grassroots groups, while unions have also funded grassroots NGOs connected to the labour movement. However, these institutions still do not have the level of grants and state funding they do in richer countries.

8 This problem has also facilitated division with the nationalist factions of the liberal-progressive bloc and parts of this bloc complained bitterly that the IMF crisis had made for a fire sale of Korean assets to foreign firms. Unfortunately, members of these factions have often been less critical when it was domestic rather than foreign capital that was benefiting from such restructuring (see Lee Chang Gun, 2004).

9 According to a January 2004 report to the OECD by the KCTU (2005), outstanding damage claims for all workplaces amounted to nearly US$100 million. Though much of this amount was never collected, the role of damage claims has been to dissuade strike action by the labour movement, especially political strikes and action by irregular workers. Though claims have led in some cases to the suicide of affected workers, what normally seems to happen is that workers continue to strike until the employer rescinds the claim, leaving labour relations where they left off.

10 One former economic advisor on economic affairs that I interviewed, who had quit over Kor-US FTA negotiations, argued the president was “emotionally very progressive” but lacked concrete plans for dealing with the ministries who soon got the better of him and were able to influence the negotiations on strategic flexibility with the USA and the Kor-US FTA.

11 The debates between members of Taean Yeondae (Positions Network) and PSPD were perhaps the most heated in this regard, and were centred around the role of state and whether or not it should pursue industrial policy, as well as whether or not corporate governance restructuring was desirable. These debates also influenced early rifts in the Uri Party between the party chairman Kim Kun Tae and the bloc around Roh that favoured corporate governance reform.

12 It is interesting to note that Lee Jeong Woo himself was also a scholar involved in a collection of writing theorising “developmental dictatorship,” a theory advanced by a number of progressive scholars to understand the multiple dimensions of industrialisation and social segmentation during the Park Chung Hee era (Lee Byeon Cheon, 2006).

13 The term pro-government forces refers primarily to lawmakers that supported President Roh in the National Assembly following the gradual dissolution of Roh’s ruling Uri Party. The term can also be interpreted in an expanded sense to include those organisations within social movements and civil society that supported Roh against opposition conservative forces.
References