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

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ABSTRACT

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

1 INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, democratic politics in South Korea have been accompanied by two salient political issues: the continuous fission and fusion of political parties, and regionalism. The process of fission and fusion, seemingly unstoppable, was by and large justified by the prevailing administration (which orchestrated them) as a measure necessary to ensure the country’s governability by enabling the government to attain a majority status in parliament. Party merger and switching have been the most commonly practiced tools to achieve such a goal. This important ‘feature’ of politics in the Republic of
Korea (ROK—South Korea) came to dominate and eventually disrupt even the Roh Moo-hyun administration (2003-08).

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

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

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