ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explain the split in the South Korean Democratic Labor Party (DLP). To do so, it traces the process leading up to this split, from the heated debates among the main factions after the North Korean nuclear test in October 2006, through the response within the party to the Ilsimhoe case (where party officials were tried in court for allegedly spying for the North Korean authorities), to the DLP Congress in February 2008, which finalised the break-up of the party. It argues that the exacerbating effect that these events had on cleavages between the main factions within the DLP regarding its relationship with the regime in North Korea, or what this paper refers to as the ‘Northern Question,’ was the key factor leading to the split in the DLP. Implications beyond the DLP are discussed in the conclusion.

1 INTRODUCTION

Nearly 12 years have now passed since an ad hoc coalition between various activist groups and trade unions was formed to contest the 1997 presidential elections on the progressive ticket in Korea. This grouping would eventually play the key role in the establishment of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in 2000, which would in turn garner 13.1 percent of the party-list vote in the general elections four years later to become the third political force within South Korean
However, after this initial stage of continuous and sometimes explosive growth in membership, support, and influence, the DLP has floundered. The number of its representatives in the National Assembly was reduced to half during the latest elections in April 2008. Its vote share dipped to 40 percent of what it had received in 2004.

Moreover, the DLP suffered a split just before the election, with members leaving the party en masse during late 2007 and early 2008. Those that left have played a central role in the founding of the New Progressive Party (NPP), ending the virtual monopoly over the left that the DLP had held in institutional politics. About a third of the DLP’s nearly one hundred thousand members, and four of the ten figures elected to the National Assembly in 2004 left the party during this process. Whereas the DLP had felt confident enough in 2004 to establish a committee to draw up a strategy for taking power in 2012, both the DLP and the new NPP now fight for relevancy in Korean politics. What were the immediate issues and factors that lead to the split? What were the underlying differences and cleavages within the party driving it?

Scholarship on the DLP has mostly focused on its ascent during the 2004 general elections and has interpreted the DLP’s rise as reflecting or portending broader trends and changes in Korean politics. When they have examined the factors or causes that explain the entrance of the party into the National Assembly, analysts and scholars have stressed institutional factors such as the introduction of a separate party-list vote that made it easier for a new party to become represented in the legislative branch, or the role of social actors such as civic pressure groups and their mobilisation of resources against the political status quo, which in turn affected such institutional changes (Lee and Lim 2006).

While these studies do provide us with various interpretations of the advent of the DLP into legislative politics, and the change in the

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3 Korea has a presidential system, with a unicameral legislature. There are 299 members in the National Assembly, with 243 being elected as representatives of their regional constituencies, and the remaining 56 being elected on a separate party-list vote. The DLP’s ten seats in 2004 came from winning two regional constituencies in the industrial cities of Ulsan and Changwon, and the eight seats which were allocated in accordance with the 13.1 percent it polled nationwide on the party-list vote.

4 They have variously characterised the general elections of 2004 and the DLP’s rise as reflecting ‘consolidation of democracy’ within the Korean polity, a sign of the transition from ‘entourage to ideology’, or a ‘victory for the electoral process’: Shin 2004: 77-78; Steinberg and Shin 2006; and Hwang 2004.