

INSTITUTE OF ASIAN STUDIES



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We have met with Dr. Kim in her office in Budapest and talked briefly about contemporary politics in South Korea and “conservatives’ stronghold” in East Asia.

Thank you for having us Dr. Kim. To start our interview could you please comment and describe current political landscape of the Republic of Korea for our readers to provide them with context?

It is my pleasure to have you here, thank you for coming all the way to Budapest. Well, political situation in Korea could be generally assessed both skeptically and positively. And I am not trying to be evasive here. At first sight it looks like the same old situation. Opposition, although fractioned, tries to tackle down all new policies the government wants to implement.

From my perspective as a researcher, however, I focus on the (re)emerging power of conservatives at the moment, not only in Korea but in East Asia as such. In 1997 we witnessed a political turnover in South Korea, when the conservatives lost their political power and influence, in Taiwan it was in 2000 and it happened in mid-2000 in Japan as well. But very soon after that, it was the opposition who in turn lost power and all the conservatives came back right away. And somehow, almost all of them are sons, daughters, or next of kin of the former leaders. There is a big number of ‘power relatives’ you can see sitting in the parliaments in East Asia these days. From their rhetoric, some of the conservative politicians even seem to believe and act as if they had never lost the power in the first place. They lent the office to the opposition temporarily, in Korea for a decade, in Taiwan for 8 years, in Japan much shorter and then they came back to reclaim it.

My recent research question is to try analyze what are the main reasons for this reemergence of the dominant conservatives we see in East Asia and why it has been the dominant power for such a long time. If you want to get an easy answer, there seems to be one - 'it is due to their economic performance model' which has been highly successful. But explaining this phenomenon in more details might be a much more complex task. When the conservatives came back in 2008 in South Korea - the predecessors of Park Geun-hye administration - Lee Myong-bak administration - people used to say: "We gave the power to the opposition, the progressives, and they did not seem to do well, and were involved in corruption too. So since all politicians are thieves, we would like to give the power to a thief that can at least make money."

In summary, to answer your question, the political landscape at the moment is simply the dominance of conservative parties in East Asia. That is the case for South Korea, too.

How do you expect the situation to evolve, when all these conservative politicians and often strong nationalists are in power? Let us take for example Shinzo Abe, PM of Japan, who pushes forward slightly controversial agenda - reinterpretation of the constitution, which makes relations between the countries in East Asia tense. He got reelected at the end of previous year. Do conservatives get along?

From the Japanese viewpoint, Japan is technically forbidden to have its own defense - or military, to be more accurate - and because of the restrictions incorporated in their constitution they cannot be independent solely. From this perspective, I fully understand their position on this issue, but then again in terms of China or the Korean peninsula, these attempts to pursue, in their rhetoric, 'normalization' are extremely sensitive because of the grudges of the past. Both China and Korea have been colonized by Japan and waged wars against one another. I think you need to perceive every country's experience through their history to understand this political deadlock and the kind of attitude they have. The way the Japanese government is moving is a little bit to the right, sometimes far right, but when I see all of these countries I can understand their attitudes.

What complicates the situation, too, is the US. The role of the US is important because the reason why Japan wants to have a more active role in the regional security structure and to be independent is because of a light push from the US. United States want to spend less money on protection of Japan and preserve, in this way, their own finances. When I visited Japan and talked to scholars about this issue they said "We have the US pointing gun at our back. What can the government do?"

This is a really sensitive issue to talk about but I think they can get along because they mostly make decisions fairly economically related. Virtually all countries in East Asia are highly economically interrelated so at the end of the day, they need to get along. In the past US used to be a huge market for all of them, mainly when they were in their developmental stage but now the market has moved to China. The US influence is therefore smaller than it used to be but it is still there.

How do you perceive the government of the current president Park Geun-hye. Her disapproval rates have been slightly rising lately, what should we think of that?

It is really interesting to see what she was as an opposition leader during the progressive government and what Park Geun-hye has become now. Particularly during the Moo-hyun administration from 2003 to 2008, she was by then partially the opposition leader and whatever the government wanted to do, she did not help at all. Now, it seems that what goes around comes around. I think she perfectly came to understand the game of politics. Being opposed on whoever she wants to appoint as a minister or a secretary or anything else. That is the political game. Whoever has moral flaws or anything even marginally off about them, is being tracked down. And they should be, this is not something new, it's politics.

Interestingly enough, particularly for the conservative parties, they are more likely to be flawed, because they are the one who used to enjoy the power and an affluent life thanks to their parents and their parents' parents generation. When you think about the 1970s - 1990s, these families are the ones who remained in power through the authoritarian times. Then, when the president appoints someone now, it is easy to target the appointee tracing back their family history. Their son could have had a military duty exemption illegally, or embezzlement record or any other dirt you could think of. But this is a very positive thing, it is noisy and loud but democratic politics are supposed to be that way, with a lot of struggle for everyone engaged in it.

When you talk about the absence of opposition and in turn a strong position of the Saenuri Party, or the conservatives, do you actually see any potential popular figures among the opposition who could succeed in the upcoming 2017 presidential elections?

At the moment Moon Jae-in, the main opposition party NPAD (New Politics Alliance for Democracy) leader, has a high support in the public opinion polls. If I went back just to the previous presidential elections, it was a huge loss for the opposition that the coalition building between the two main opposition leaders Moon Jae-in and Ahn Cheol-soo did not go well. It was one of the reasons they ultimately lost the elections. However, in the public opinion polls just a year before the election took place, the two opposition leaders had in fact much higher public support than Park Geun-hye. But when there are three main candidates competing for the office and the coalition of two of them crumbles, who is the one who will win?

It is said in South Korea that the conservatives go down because of their corruption and progressives because of their factions. Opposition is not doing well at the moment. They might win though if people are not happy with the economic performance of the conservatives. Which could turn out unfortunate for Park Geun-hye, since the government's economic performance is not necessarily only the result of domestic matters, but it is also heavily reliant on and reflects international economic situation as for example the US and Chinese economic conditions.

Last year around December one of the opposition parties, the UPP (Unified Progressive

Party), got dissolved by the Constitutional Court of the ROK and some have interpreted it as a restriction from the conservatives on freedom of speech. How do you perceive this move?

Yes, the UPP was dissolved after the ruling of the Constitutional Court on December 19. Lee Seok-ki, one of the UPP's former five National Assembly representatives, all of whom lost their mandates after Court's ruling, was sentenced to prison. In legal terms and according to the facts, this all was lawful, because they breached the National Security Act, but whether it was democratic or not is questionable. In South Korea there is National Security Act currently in force since 1948 that forbids you from praising North Korean system. At least some of its provisions. Even at schools, universities or anywhere else. The UPP was dissolved after a petition by the Park Geun-hye government in November 2013 on allegations that it was acting under orders from North Korea due to its pro-North Korea views.

During the progressive periods, legislators of the then-majority Uri Party tried to abolish National Security Act but they failed, because there are still people who remember the Korean War and the division between the North and South and how ugly it went off. Presently it seems unlikely that it will be gotten rid of. UPP and people who got arrested were arrested according to the law, but given that there was even a discussion on abolishing the Act and conservatives felt confident enough to discuss it, I must ask was it really necessary to dissolve the UPP? The party was supported by people. It had its members in the parliament because the UPP was successful at building the coalition with the NPAD, although it was very small.

You said that the agenda that gets conservative parties to the government is the economy because progressives tend to perform poorly in this respect. How would you evaluate the economic performance of the Park Geun-hye administration and the general prospects for the South Korean economy?

We are soon approaching the time for the current administration to fall into the lame duck period, whoever becomes the next president. But it still seems too early to judge the economic performance of Park's administration. We do not only have to look at her time in the office but prior to that too. When politicians campaign they promise, we will do this, we will do that. For the Park Geun-hye administration the campaign promise was that of an 'economic democratization'. Supporting the welfare system for the youth, children or parents with young children and senior people. I do not think they have met a satisfactory level in this regard thus far, certainly not compared to what they have promised. But then again you can only see this after the administration finishes.

People seem to be worried about potential economic crisis. Interest rates have been recently lowered, really low, down to one percent level and I do hope this policy works but people still remain worried. What if after decreasing the interest rates that low - interest rate has in fact never been lower - people still do not spend their money? What if to the contrary people end up having even more debt than they currently do? This could play out as the subprime crisis in the US, where they offered a lot of loans with a low level of interest and we have unfortunately

witnessed what has happened next. Park's government has employed a very special remedy to boost the economy but it is still a long time for us to see whether it works. In five years time we will maybe say it turned out to be just the right solution we needed for the problem or someone could say it was because of this policy that we had a crisis. It is interesting to work in social sciences, because you can only analyze the problem after it happened and a good remedy could be in reality a horrible one, depending on how you interpret and explain different factors.

There have been indications last year that a high level meeting between the ROK and the DPRK could take place. How do you perceive the current state of relations between the two Koreas?

I think North Korea, South Korea and China might all meet soon in Russia, if I am not mistaken. I believe the ROK and DPRK relations should have continued in the so called 'engagement policy', which was implemented during the progressive period from 1997 to 2008 but stopped because of the US, who after the terror attack on September 11, reverted back to containment policies. South Korea was thus somewhat stuck in between their own progressive policy towards North Korea, and a contradicting containment policy pursued by the United States. South Korea actively pursued the engagement policy since the late 1990s and in early 2000s it established several South Korean factories in the DPRK and organized a lot of 'trips' for South Koreans to go to North Korea. Then they suddenly stopped. These are some flaws of the conservative government's policy towards the North, but they do not have that many options. They need to align with the US policy on North Korea, so when the Americans say we do not want to talk to North, South Korea follows suit. That is what should change.

I think that cessation of the engagement policy towards the North is a huge loss. North and South are very different countries now. Some argue they cannot possibly be one nation anymore. After 50 years of living in two different worlds, South Koreans and North Koreans have significantly different identities, so even if they became unified another huge challenge would surface, which is how to mingle them. Should it ever come to this, there should be a 'preparation period' with a focus on an economic engagement to balance and moderate the disparity there is between the countries.

North Korea is not going to disappear soon, both because they possess nuclear arsenal, which is one of their main trumpf cards they play almost every time and also they can always ally with China or Russia. They are facing sanctions from the West but are not necessarily totally isolated. They still have regional big powers around them, to which they could turn to if the situation was dire. The North Korean system appears to live on its own and probably will live for some time so I think the economic engagement is important and probably the first step South needs to take. Social engagement should follow and then, maybe decades later, political engagement, if the unification is ever to happen. Moreover, if it really were to happen someday, the role of China would be really huge compared to that of the US and the role of Russia maybe as well.

interviewer: Šimon Drugda

Opinions expressed in this interview are those of the respondent and do not reflect the position of the Institute of Asian Studies.



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