

American Image of Kim Dae Jung of South Korea: President-Elected Kim Dae Jung and American Newspapers Editorials in 1997

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Abstract – The victory of Kim Dae Jung on the presidential election of the Republic of Korea on December 18, 1997 was significant for South Korean political history and Korean-American relations. Kim became the first President from the opposition party as well as the first one from Jolla Province. Although he was considered as a symbol of democracy he was able to win the election because of the financial crisis took place few weeks before the election. Most of American newspaper editorials emphasized the importance of economic reform for Kim Dae Jung while they hesitated to predict his success as President. Americans were also experienced the transition of power for their important ally country a new chapter in Korean-American relations.

Keywords: Kim Dae Jung; South Korea; Financial Crisis of 1997; American Public Opinion; Gwangju Democratic Movement; North Korea

1. Introduction

On December 18, 1997, a life-time opposition leader Kim Dae Jung was elected as the new President of the Republic of Korea. 72 years old veteran politician of South Korea achieved his life time goal as the leader of the National Congress for New Politics party. It was significant in South Korean political history since it was the first victory of the opposition party to won the presidential election.

The final month of the presidential race had been dominated by the bailout of the nation's economy led by the International Monetary Fund (IMF). South Koreans considered it as the national humiliation since they were so proud of their achievement of economic miracle. While it took Britain 150 years for industrialization, South Korea achieved it less than a generation. South Korea became the most successful nation to achieve economic development among the countries created after the World War II.

Initially, Kim Dae Jung took the position for renegotiating the terms imposed by the IMF while other major candidates promised to accept the terms. As a populist, Kim tried to appeal to the people to heal the pain of humiliation. However, he changed his position and he signed a written pledge with other two major candidates to carry out the economic reforms that had been mandated by the IMF on December 13, 1997 if he would be elected as the President.

Although he failed to earned majority, Kim Dae Jung defeated Lee Hoi Chang, the candidate of the ruling

Grand National Party and Rhee In Je, former governor of Gyeonggi Province and the candidate of conservative United Liberal Democratic Party led by Kim Jong Pil. Since they had few major ideological differences, South Korean voters decided on the perceptions of the candidates' characters (*Editorials on File*, Dec. 16-31, 1997, 1530). At the time of major economic crisis, some considered as the major national crisis since the Korean War of 1950-1953, South Korean voters interestingly choose the leader to take care of economic problem and democratization at once.

Victory of Kim Dae Jung on American newspapers was considered as a great achievement of South Korea's democracy. At the same time, most of them emphasized the importance of the success of economic reform for Kim to be a successful President of the Republic of Korea. Because of this reason, American newspapers hesitated to give a full confidence on Kim as a new President. The economic crisis of 1997 in South Korea was so severe and it could harm the global economy. This was why American newspapers hoped for Kim to do well.

2. Kim Dae Jung and His Road to the Presidency

Kim Dae Jung was born on December 3, 1925 in a small island village in southwestern coast of Korea, Shinan in Jeolla Province. He graduated from a commercial high school in Mokpo in 1943. He worked as a clerk for a Japanese-owned shipping company. He became its owner after the end of Japanese occupation of Korea in 1945 and became a rich local businessman.

Kim entered politics in 1954 and was elected as a

representative for the National Assembly in 1961, but the military coup d'état led by Park Chung Hee dissolved the National Assembly three days later. Kim was able to win a seat in the National Assembly in 1963 and emerged as a junior leader within his own party. He served as the spokesman for the Democratic Party in 1965 and became the chairman of the party's Policy Planning Committee next year.

When Kim was reelected in 1967, he became an eminent opposition leader against the ruling party controlled by Park Chung Hee. In 1971 he became an opposition presidential candidate. Despite the obstacles and illegal electioneering practices of the ruling party, he was able to gain 46% of votes. Although Park Chung Hee was reelected as President of South Korea, Kim became a symbol of democracy against Park's regime and a major political threat for the ruling party as well as Park.

Kim Dae Jung was almost killed in August 1973, when he was kidnapped from a hotel in Tokyo by KCIA (Korean Central Intelligence Agency) agents in response to his criticism of *Yusin*, which granted near-dictatorial powers to Park Chung Hee. Although he returned to Seoul, he was banned from politics and imprisoned with five years sentence in 1976 for the participation in the proclamation for an anti-government manifesto. Although it was reduced to house arrest in 1978, he was designated a prisoner of conscience by Amnesty International. Kim was not only a threat to the regime domestically, but internationally.

After the assassination of Park Chung Hee in 1979, Kim's political rights were restored shortly. However in 1980, Kim was arrested and sentenced to death on charges of sedition and conspiracy in the wake of another military coup led by Chun Doo Hwan and a popular democratic uprising in Gwangju. With the intervention of the United States government, the sentence was commuted to 20 years in prison and later he was given exile to the U.S.

Kim Dae Jung stayed in Boston as a visiting professor to the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University until he decided to return to South Korea in 1985. As soon as he returned to South Korea, he was again put under house arrest, but resumed his role as a principal leader of the opposition. In 1987, Chun Doo Hwan was forced to accept the popular demand for direct presidential election, Kim ran for the election despite the popular demands for the coalition of the opposition. As a result, he became the third with 27% of the vote and blamed for the split of opposition vote. It became the most crucial moment for his political career.

He ran for the presidency again in 1992 and failed against Kim Young Sam of Grand National Party. Many thought Kim Dae Jung's political career was over when he left Seoul to London. Kim Dae Jung lost the election against Kim Young Sam who successfully allied with the conservatives.

But he announced his return to politics and began his fourth attempts for the presidency. The situation

became favorable because of the Asian financial crisis just weeks before the presidential election of 1997. Allied with Kim Jong Pil representing the political interests of Chungcheong area, he was elected as the President. The political union of Jolla and Chungcheong Provinces made it possible.

The election held on December 18, Kim Dae Jung won with 40.3% of the popular vote against Lee Hoi Chang of the ruling party. He became the eighth President of the Republic of Korea on February 25, 1998. He was the first President from the opposition party. At the same time, he was the first President from Jolla Province since the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948.

3. Reactions of American Newspapers on Kim Dae Jung As a New President of The Republic of Korea

An editorial of *Boston Herald* on December 20, 1997 considered that Kim Dae Jung's election as President of South Korea was remarkable as Nelson Mandela's of South Africa. This event would further the democratization of South Korea. *The Sun* (Dec. 23, 1977) of Baltimore, Maryland equaled the Kim Dae Jung as Vaclav Havel of Czech Republic, Lech Walesa of Poland and Corazon Aquino of Philippines. According to this editorial, Kim was a crusader of democracy and he deserved to win election as President.

The Birmingham News of Alabama on December 23, 1997 also stated that "With his triumph Kim becomes the Asian Nelson Mandela." *Portland Press Herald* of same date also pointed out that the victory of Kim Dae Jung as President of South Korea was cause for celebration by democrats around the world. These newspapers considered Kim Dae Jung as the symbol of South Korean democracy and welcomed his victory for the advancement of democracy not just for South Korea but around the world. Even though the Col War was over a decade ago, American public opinion still considered that the American value of democracy was so important.

On the other hand, *Minneapolis Star and Tribune* (Dec. 22, 1977) believed that the result of the 1997 election in South Korea was the outcome of the voters repudiating the ruling elites who brought the national crisis. At the same time, South Korean people did not consider Kim Dae Jung's image no longer a revolutionary but prodemocracy. *The Denver Post* of Dec. 1, 1997 noticed that Kim Dae Jung's victory was "truly a remarkable" event. Still, it pointed out that the election showed not Kim's personal victory but the maturity of South Korea's democracy. For Koreans, according to this editorial, the image of opposition was no longer a revolutionary, but a matter of simple politics. It emphasized that the change of image made possible for the transfer of power. It seemed to be more objective to see the political development of South Korea.

Many American newspapers emphasized that the outcome of the election of 1997 was not a personal

victory of Kim Dae Jung, nor the victory of democracy. The key issue of the election of 1997 was not a political one but economy. Because of the impact of Asian financial crisis, South Korea's economy was in a severe crisis that could sweep out the achievement of economic miracle for the last three decades. *The Washington Times* (Dec. 26, 1997) of Washington D.C. stated very clear that Kim Dae Jung had two major tasks for his presidency. First of all, according to the editorial of this newspaper, Kim needed to restore stability and confidence in a system that was shot through with bad debt. Another task was to restore faith in South Korea's political system to carry out the reform. It emphasized that Kim ought to provide a long term reform. It would include a much needed cleaning up and liberalization of South Korea's banking system. At the same time, Kim needed to carry out the depoliticalization of the central bank. It concluded that for the sake of South Korea, Kim should be a right man at the right time.

The Providence Journal of Rhode Island on December 26, 1997 also pointed out that the victory of Kim Dae Jung came from the South Koreans' anger at the country's financial situation. It was skeptical for the capacity of Kim Dae Jung at age of 72 who "appeared to have lost some of his mental acuity." Still, Kim must realize that the critical issue for South Korea was the financial crisis rather than a peaceful reunification of South and North Korea according to the editorial. *The New York Times* (Dec. 19, 1997) pointed out that the Kim Dae Jung's decision to withdraw the renegotiation with IMF's harsh terms was a wise movement since it could be a threat for the foreign investors. Both editorials hoped that Kim needed to see the situation accurately and prepare for the economic reform on his priority.

The Sacramento Bee of California (Dec. 23, 1997) emphasized that Kim Dae Jung should realize that his victory was not based on the issues on his personal background or the democratization but the financial crisis. It pointed out that the country's industrial model was in ruins because of the insider loans from banks to factories with government smoothing the way and holding down wages. This editorial concluded that South Koreans possessed a ferocious work ethic and its financial market and exchange rate would have leveled off after an initial pounding. That was why Kim had much to do but much to work with according an editorial of *The Sacramento Bee*.

On December 18, 1997, *San Francisco Chronicle* of California also mentioned that new President Kim Dae Jung needed to react practically. According to the editorial, Kim must try to cool the rage of proud South Koreans, who felt humiliated over a \$57 billion bailout from the IMF that came with strings attached. Since South Korea's economy had some fundamental problems, Kim should overcome the situation with pragmatism rather than his populist style. It hoped for Kim to have the energy, imagination and flexibility. On the other hand, *Boston Herald* (Dec. 20, 1997) stated that the South Korea needed to have a populist leader like Kim Dae Jung at this time to heal and unite South Koreans to

overcome the crisis.

The Daily Oklahoman of Oklahoma City (Dec. 30, 1997) pointed out that there were skeptical views on the capacity of Kim to carry out much needed reform while restoring South Korea's economic confidence. Still, at the time of crisis South Korea needed creative and dynamic leadership. It hoped that Kim's evident wisdom should serve him well.

Some American newspaper editorials considered Kim Dae Hung's victory for the presidency of South Korea as the victory of democracy. From his political career he was considered as Nelson Mandela of Asia. On the other hand, some believed that Kim Dae Jung was an old populist politician and worried about his capacity to take care of the economic crisis.

All most all American newspaper editorials emphasized that Kim need to take care of the economic problem of South Korea effectively. The rage from the humiliation of South Korean people needed to be cool down. At the same time, Kim as the new President satisfied the IMF and foreign investors. Those were the major tasks Kim Dae Jung must deal with as a new President of South Korea.

Although American newspapers failed to pinpoint the weakness of Kim Dae Jung securing less than 50% of votes and the first President from Jolla Province, they were accurate that Kim must concentrate on economic issue rather than internal political and North Korean issues. As the key ally of South Korea, American newspapers did not reflect full confidence on Kim Dae Jung because it was the first time to see the transition of power from ruling party to opposition party in South Korea. For many Americans, they did not want to see drastic changes in policies of South Korean government including the policy toward North Korea as well as the Korean-American relations.

At the same time, Kim's background as a populist gave them some hesitation to support with full confidence. They were cautious to judge that Kim would be a successful President of the Republic of Korea at the time of major economic crisis. The victory of Kim Dae Jung was a new challenge for American foreign affairs. This was why all most all editorials emphasized that Kim's major task was economic reform.

4. Conclusion

Kim Dae Jung was elected as a new President of the Republic of Korea in 1997 at the time of the major economic crisis after South Korea enjoyed the remarkable success of the economic development for the last three decades. Because of the economic crisis of the Asian financial crisis, Kim was able to become the President. Kim became the first President from Jolla Province. Also he achieved the transition of power to the opposition party for the first time since the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948 although he only received 43% of votes with fragile alliance with Kim Jong Pil who

was a key figure of military coup d'eta of 1961.

For the American newspaper editorials, Kim Dae Jung was not the figure to receive full confidence as a new partner for America as an important ally nation in the East Asia since the Korean War of 1950-1953. While some of them welcomed his victory as a victory of democracy, many of them hope for Kim Dae Jung to concentrate on the economic reforms imposed by the IMF. They were accurate to see the situation that South Korea's urgent problem was to overcome economic problem.

Many editorials carefully hope that Kim would carry out fundamental financial reforms since Kim was considered as a populist politician. Although they hesitated to mention that there could be a political retaliation since he suffered for long time as an opposition leader. This was why some newspapers emphasized the importance of political reconciliation (*The Providence Journal*, Dec. 26, 1997).

At the same time, they were very much cautious to express their opinion. There were several reasons for that. First of all, it was the first time that Americans saw the President from opposite party in South Korea while Washington officially maintaining the support for ruling party including President Chun Du Hwan who led the massacre during the democratic movement in Gwangju, Jolla Province just before he completed his military coup in 1980. Also, as the defender of world democracy, America welcome democratization progress in South Korea, but South Korea's economy was more urgent issue for Americans than political issue on South Korea.

Regardless the American public opinion, Kim successfully united South Korean people to overcome the humiliation by launching the popular 'gold gathering movement'. It was the psychological success for Kim to make South Koreans to face the financial crisis. His populist tactic worked well and with the popular support, he was able to carry out painful financial reform imposed by the IMF.

Kim Dae Jung is considered as the second best President in the history of the Republic of Korea after Park Chung Hee (*Nocut News*, Aug. 26, 2009). He also was the first Korean received Nobel Peace Award for his historical visit to Pyeongyang, the capital of North Korea for the

first time as the President to ease the tension between South and North Korea.

Kim Dae Jung's victory of 1997 presidential election healed the antagonism developed from regionalism in Korean politics. Although his 'Sunshine Policy' toward North Korea and corruptions of his government still were controversial, Kim Dae Jung's victory was very significant for Korean political history as well as Korean-American relations. According to *Wikileaks*, American ambassador Alexander Vershbow who served in Seoul from 2005 to 2008 reported to Washington that Kim Dae Jung was an international politician who took care of foreign affairs well while selecting his successor delicately (*Chosun.com*, May 2, 2011). Kim was successful to maintain cordial relations with Washington regardless the initial skepticism.

Acknowledgement: This work was supported by the Soonchunhyang University Research Fund

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