

KIM YOUNGMI. *THE POLITICS OF COALITION IN KOREA: BETWEEN INSTITUTIONS AND CULTURE*. LONDON: ROUTLEDGE, 2011

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The book addresses the issue of political coalitions in South Korea. After making a foray in the recent history of political coalitions in this country, the author focuses on Kim Dae-jung administration (1998-2003). She chooses to explore the period in which Kim Dae-jung was president, because she is interested in identifying the source of the legislative blockages of the reforms initiated in this period. Although Kim Dae-jung managed to win the election and become president with the support of a political coalition, his presidential period was marked by legislative blockages caused by the opposition parties, but also by the parties that initially supported him in the electoral campaign.

The Kim Dae-jung administration was, in the author's opinion, "a minority coalition government" (Kim, 2011:1). Hence the special interest of the author for this period. In her opinion, Kim Dae-jung administration was a "typically" one, because of the presence of "typical problems that have emerged in recently democratized countries (Korea, a number of Latin American states and elsewhere)" (Kim, 2011:15).

Furthermore, the main purpose of Kim Youngmi's analysis was to identify the factors that influence the governability in a presidential system supported by a minority coalition.

The questions formulated at the beginning of the book give us clear indications about how the author would treat the topic. On the one hand, the questions advanced take into account the factors related to the history of the coalitions built after the democratization of South Korea (1987), the manner in which the coalition that brought Kim Dae-jung to power was built, the existence of a process of fragmentation of the political parties accompanied by an interest in building political coalitions, but also the factors limiting the negotiation process in the political space.

On the other hand, the author asks herself why, in the context of the presidential and semi-presidential regimes, a minority political coalition having reached to power seeks to attract the members of the opposition and to build a parliamentary majority?

Based on these questions, Kim Youngmi advances the central idea of the book: "the low level of institutionalization and the political culture embedded in Korean society (including among political actors and voters) are the crucial determinants of the country's ungovernability" (Kim, 2011: 2).

The author starts her approach from the mode in which institutionalization was conceptualized by Panebianco (1988), Mainwaring and (1998), Randall and Svåsand (2002). Further, Kim Youngmi introduces in the analysis two dimensions of the institutionalization: the internal and external aspects of the parties.

The general hypothesis of this work has been developed from these aspects: the stability of a minority government and coalition is influenced by two main factors: internal party dynamics (factionalism, leadership, cohesiveness of party organization) and party system (regionalism, ideological cleavage, linkage role).

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To verify the advanced working hypotheses, Kim Youngmi used qualitative and quantitative methods. She realised a content analysis of the Korean media (Korean Integrated News Database System website) and of party platforms, strategies and behaviours (1998-2010). Also, she made a secondary analysis of the research data of the East Asia Institute (Survey data on Political and Social Opinions in South Korea). Then, she realised 25 in-depth semi-structured interviews with members of the Korean political elite (during 2004-2009).

The book has been structured into seven chapters. The first chapter is, in fact, an introduction to the subject of this work, an overview of the discussed theoretical perspectives, hypotheses, methods and working techniques used. To make the work accessible, but also to give a holistic view to her study, the author carries out a critical analysis of the international scientific literature addressing either the issue of parliamentary coalitions, or the issue of political blockages (in presidential systems) generated by the presence of minority coalitions or the dividing of governments.

Chapter 2 is thus structured as to provide information about contemporary Korean political history. The author makes a foray into the history of Korea, of the political parties in Korea (since 1948), a description of the political activity of leader Kim Dae-jung in the authoritarian governments and the period of democratic consolidation and after democratization. Also here, the author introduces to discussion the features specific to the Kim Dae-jung administration period (1998-2003), summarizing the main difficulties related to the reform of Korean society.

Thus, the author tries to analyze the Kim Dae-jung administration in a broader context, taking into account what happened before and after his mandate. This second chapter was specifically introduced into the structure of the book to describe the political context before Kim Dae-jung administration.

In Chapter 3, the author focuses on the political parties to highlight the way intra- and inter-party conflicts affected governability. The author analyzes how some groups had fused or had emerged from parties and had migrated to other parties. It also highlights the manner some personalities and political leaders have evolved within coalitions or political parties. Intra- and inter-party conflicts had also involved in the political game the civil society (groups of people). These groups were driven by the desire to eliminate from the political life the leaders involved in corruption acts. It is interesting that this type of action was also experienced in Romania, the theme of the fight against corruption being present in all election campaigns. Another similarity would be that in this political game had been involved representatives of civil society which, like those in Korea, launched lists of corrupt candidates.

Also in this chapter is shown how the political parties are operating in Korea. Described as „cadre parties or mass bureaucratic parties” (Kim, 2011: 71), Korea parties gather over 6 million people (approximately 18.23% of the voters) (idem, 73). The author presents information on party financing (subsidies of 800 won per voter, donations from individuals or organizations), but also on how revenues are allocated to political parties (maintenance of the office, sending money to family of the potential voters). We noted that the author granted an important place to the traditional cultural elements specific to Korean politics: the allocation by the parties of a significant part of their monthly income to expenses for important events in people's lives (funerals and weddings). It also brings into discussion the way party leaders are perceived locally and centrally like a "father figure" who cares about voters (Kim, 2011: 79). This way of relating to voters, also, is presented by Kim as the result of Confucian culture.

The following two chapters describe the way conflicts were built during the Kim Dae-jung administration and the topics that have been debated: the Election Law (Chapter 4) and the Sunshine Policy and the abolition of the National Security Law (Chapter 5).

The first part of Chapter four analyzes how the leaders of the three main political parties of the “three Kims era” (Im 2004 cited in Kim 2011:95) have managed to obtain the constant support of voters from three regions of Korea. She even succeeds to prove that the three leaders Kim and the three parties they represent are identified with three regions: Kim Dae-jung (NCNP/MDP) with Honam, Kim Jong-pil (ULD) with Chungcheong and Kim Young-sam (NKP/GNP) with Yeongnam. Furthermore, the author notes that there are three regions of Korea that have launched to political life

most of the presidents: the provinces of Gyeongsang, Jeolla and Chungcheong. This relationship between the voters in certain regions and the leaders of the parties is carefully analyzed by the author. According to the author, this monopolization of the votes from a region by the parties "undermines fair competition in the election in the region" (Kim, 2011:108). In fact, this first part of Chapter 4 helps us understand why Kim Dae-jung's attempt to reform the political institutions had generated strong political conflicts and rejection reactions from political leaders. The author exemplifies how political parties had reacted to the initiative of Kim Dae-jung (also supported by two leaders UDL) on reducing the number of legislators in the National Assembly and the number of other institution and the introduction of a Mixed Member Proportional Representation System (German – style mixed electoral system). The political parties had reacted according to their leaders' interests, i.e. to keep their place in the NA and other privileges and were less willing to introduce a new electoral law. The author's analysis confirms the hypotheses launched at the beginning of the work that „governability is negatively affected by stronger regional cleavages (1) the degree of cohesiveness of party organization affects the governability (2)” (idem: 95).

In Chapter 5 the author analyzes how the political leaders and the political parties had reacted to Kim Dae-jung administration's initiative to abolish the National Law Security. The failure of the initiative to abolish the National Law Security had allowed the opponents of Kim Dae-jung to react when the Sunshine Policy was adopted. The strong pressure from the opposition led to the dismissal of a Minister and the dismissal of Kim Dae-jung from the MDP leadership. The author identifies the sources of blockage (ideological differences, Confucians political culture) and even formulates some solutions designed to make the negotiation and compromise possible: “setting internal rules or introducing a cross voting system” (idem, 151)

As mentioned, author analyzes the Kim Dae-jung administration taking into account the political situation before President Kim Dae-jung, but also the political situation during the administrations that followed: Roh Moo-hyun and Lee Myung-bak. Chapter six presents the political life during the two presidential administrations that were supported by a clear parliamentary majority. Roh Moo-hyun administration is described in relation to the initiatives to reform the National Security Law, The Truth and Reconciliation Law, the Media Reform Law and the Private School Law. The Lee Myung – back administration was described in relation to the reform in the educations system and the candlelight vigils (2008), the suicide of former president Roh Moo-hyun after the corruption scandal) and the Four River Reconstruction Project and the proposal to move the capital to Sejong City.

The author wanted to identify how the two administrations that had the support of a majority were able to promote some legislative projects. The conclusion drawn by the author: the two administrations have faced the same problems generated “by intra-party factionalism, continuous defections and party switches, and conflictual relations between Government and Opposition” (ibid., 167), although they were able to better manage several of the previous obstacles such as the effects of the regionalization of the parties.

The last chapter is a synthesis of the ideas and arguments presented by the author throughout the book. If the previous chapters were so constructed as to highlight the arguments that confirm or deny the hypotheses advanced at the beginning of the book, in chapter seven the author expresses her ideas in a more synthetic manner. Kim Youngmi emphasized the importance of some elements in the governance and democratization of Korea: the level of institutionalization of the party, the maintaining of specific Confucian elements in the political life of the Korean parties, the regionalization of parties, ideological conflicts (left-right) and conflicts within the political coalitions.

The theme addressed by the author is topical and of great interest to specialists in Romania. The Romanian society, also, experiences (after the fall of Ceausescu dictatorship in 1989) the building of political coalitions, legislative blockages, dissolution of political parties and the emergence of other ones. On the verge of new parliamentary elections (December 9, 2012), the Romanian society assists (or part gets involved) to the establishment of political coalitions around some political parties and strong leaders. The ultimate goal: getting a parliamentary majority meant to support the initiatives of the President or to block his actions. The analysis provided by the author reveals some similarities between the way in which political coalitions are operating in Romania and

Korea, although the two countries are in different geopolitical areas and have different cultural backgrounds.

From this perspective, the book could be for the specialists in Romania, but not only, a methodological reference for the analysis and interpretation of the Romanian political realities. The logic of the discourse, the theoretical and methodological rigor of this paper are examples to be followed by young researchers, PhD and MA in political sciences, geopolitical and security studies.

At the same time, the book is addressed to researchers interested in the issue of political coalitions, regardless of the geographical area they analyze, as it succeeds to put in correlation two main streams of scholarship on coalition researches: the researches about Western European parliamentary systems and the studies about presidential regimes in Latin America.

On the other hand, the way the author structured his discourse enables the reading of this book even by people (students and researchers in the other fields than political sciences, journalists) who did not have access to information on politics in Korea, but are interested in this space. All this is possible because the author succeeds in offering sufficient information, well organized and structured, regarding the history of political parties and political coalitions, the authoritarian period and post-democratization era, the intra-party politics, the political leaders and their capacity to link with the Citizens.