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Populist Challenge and Its Backlash

Kang Miongsei, Ph.D.

Sejong Institute

Kang Miongsei is currently a leading researcher in the department of international politics and economics at the Sejong institute in Seoul, South Korea. He holds a degree in philosophy and an M.A. in political science from Korea University; and a Ph.D. in political science from the University of California-Los Angeles. He has published several books, such as *An Economic Crisis and Social Agreement* (1999) and *Politics for Labor and Welfare in Globalization and Post-industrial* Society (2006). Dr. Kang's research interests include the relationship between globalization and domestic politics, as well as game theory and the application of statistical models to industrialized developed countries.

POPULIST CHALLENGE AND ITS BACKLASH

A new era of Korean politics began with the 2007 presidential election in Korea. After Lee Myung-bak, the presidential candidate of the Grand National Party (GNP), the opposition party, won a landslide victory, he began political realignment and conservative rule is expected to recover territory lost over the last decade. Many have wondered how and why the opposition won a sweeping victory. Lee secured more than 48 percent of the vote in a twelve-man presidential race. Prior to that, no candidate had ever been able to garner more than 50 percent of the vote since 1987, but Lee's margin over the incumbent party's candidate was more than 3.3 million votes. The conservatives' landslide victory was, in many ways, political backlash to the populist policies pursued over the previous ten years. This paper analyzes the characteristics of these previous governments that paved the way for Lee's landslide victory.

Before the conservatives' victory, Roh Moo-hyun, the former president who was elected in 2002, had fired a salvo at the elite who have long ruled the country. His election to the presidency was largely the result of successfully mobilizing marginal sectors of Korean society as well as the voters in the southwest Jeolla Province. He was the first chief executive to rise from humble origins, and had built his platform on making Korean society more equitable.

Many journalists and pundits critical of Roh labeled him a populist leader and often characterized him as a demagogue. Although never explicitly defined, the essential characteristics that led to these characterizations were Roh's special appeal to the marginalized sectors of society and his mobilization of the people against a domineering establishment. However, the general understanding of populism in Korea is so vague as to include everything and nothing. Therefore, this paper will also examine from a social-science context whether the Roh administration was really populist, and if so, what specific aspects of Roh's leadership style constituted that populism. Particular focus will be placed on how populists govern.

How Roh won the presidency has remained a big puzzle to many in South Korea. His direct appeal to masses was the greatest factor in getting him elected as president. As revealed in the pro-market orientation of the Roh government after his inauguration, however, his economic policy turned out to be more neoliberal, turning away from the type of state interventionism that was needed to bring about the kinds of changes Roh had promised on his campaign trail. He instead, opted towards efficiency-oriented policies and away from the welfare-oriented ones that he had promised to deliver during the campaign. Roh's populist challenge faced a critical juncture in the 2006 local elections when the ruling party, Roh's Uri Party, experienced an electoral disaster just after three years after Roh's populist victory. During that election, except for one region, no Uri Party candidates were elected to gubernatorial or mayoral posts.

The Uri Party's losses in the 2006 elections seemed to imply that the populist movement had lost important ground. However, the future of populism in Korea is still uncertain. Neoliberal populism, a combination of political populism and economic neoliberalism, is quite common as seen in the revival of populism across Latin America. Populism could regain strength if the political arena does not allow for marginal sectors and newcomers to be politically represented. This paper will also discuss the prospects for the political future of populism in Korea and what it would take for the labor party to regain lost ground.

THE CONCEPT OF POPULISM

There is no underlying definition of the term "populism" or convincing theory of populism. Populism is notorious for this definitional problem.[1] A wide variety of governments, parties, movements, leaders, and policies have all been labeled

"populist," and scholars, beset by conceptual disagreements and confusion, have vary radically is their descriptions of populist characteristics. They have disagreed not only over its specific attributes, but also over its primary domain. Moreover, there are so many objections to the use of the category "populism" that perhaps we should abandon its study for good. The difficulty of defining populism gets more serious as populism extends beyond its traditional spheres of influence, such as Latin America, into the advanced democracies, including western Europe.

It is fruitless to attempt to capture all aspects of populism, because populism per se remains ambiguous. Still, many scholars have tried to provide a clear definition of populism. However, despite the increasing number of case studies of populist experiences and the efforts to develop a theory of populism, today's scholars are still as perplexed as these scholars were thirty-five years ago:

> There can, at present, be no doubt about the importance of populism. But no one is quite clear just what it is. As a doctrine or as movement, it is elusive and protean. It bobs up everywhere, but in many contradictory shapes. Does it have an underlying unity, or does one name cover a multitude of unconnected tendencies? (Ionescu and Gellner, 1969: 1)

To minimize conceptual confusion, some have argued for abandoning the concept itself, but the scholarly community has refused this suggestion. Many continue to find populism to be a useful, even indispensable, concept in elucidating Latin American politics. Not surprisingly, there is disagreement about which attributes are essential to the concept (De Raadt, Hollanders and Krouwel). For example, most of these scholars attempt to distill what they view as the more specifically political features of the regime from characteristics of the society and economy, on the grounds that the latter are more appropriately analyzed as potential causes or consequences of democracy, rather than as features of democracy itself.

On the other hand, one group of scholars approaches populism as resulting from inherent tensions between democratic and undemocratic components of democratic systems. Their studies tend to associate populism with democracy in advanced democracies. Populism is closely intertwined with democracy because it takes the common people as its political base. There is even a tendency to define something unusual, abnormal, or deviant in a democracy as populist. Thus a pathological definition of populism emerges.

> [T]here is a shoe—in the shape of populism—but no foot to fit it! Over the past ten years, populism has more often than not been an easy way to deal with unusual political manifestations as if the term alone were enough to explain the new forms of political mobilization. Populism has become a catchword, particularly in the media, to designate the newborn political or social movements which challenge the entrenched values, rules and institutions of democratic orthodoxy. (Meny and Surel, 2002: 3)

In a sense, populism, as with many other concepts, is an empty shell that can be filled by whatever one wishes, as indicated long ago by Wiles (1969). However, a variety of populist accounts demonstrate common core characteristic. Populism is linked with the etymological derivation from *populus*, the connotation of a movement, regime, leader, or style that claims close affinity with *the people*. "Populo" in populism is the equivalent of "demos" in democracy. It includes the poor and working classes, and the humble and downtrodden, implying a social and political constituency of populism The etymological derivation makes populism a political style. The populist style implies a close bond between political elites and masses. Populism means a strong bond particularly when political leaders succeed in mobilizing the people in unsettled and unaligned times. Such times are political as well as economic. They include economic depressions, and structural adjustment and reform periods. A populist campaign succeeds when a large and growing reservoir of dissatisfaction, protest, and frustration exists.

For the sake of convenient discussion, I have confined my working definition of populism to political phenomena. In this

context, a core element of populism is found in "who gains public office and how they govern."[2] Populism may take place in a democracy, where votes determine leadership. Populists win elections by drawing masses of new votes into their movements. Though populism's varies from one country to another and from year to year, we can still identify certain recurrent characteristics. First and foremost, populism follows certain rules that may be generally subsumed under the generic term "demagoguery," which consists of identifying the concerns of the majority and proposing solutions for them that are simple to understand but impossible to apply. Populists often use demagoguery as a convenient tool to mobilize masses. Populist leadership also appeals to nationalistic tendencies shared by the masses. It claims to defend national or cultural/ethnic identity against outsiders or external influences. Many writers also note a paternalistic, plebiscitary style of political leadership as a defining characteristic of populism.

Populist leaders recruit the majority of their admirers from among the less educated; those who know little of other countries, whether near or far, who are against others and even more hostile to globalization in general. In short, among those who fear finding themselves excluded. Globalization produces winners and losers; the losers in globalization are unskilled or semi-skilled workers all over the world, who, in their fear and frustration, form the potential electorate of populist parties (Cuperus 2003).

Populism tends to be ideologically vague. Where can we locate populism with respect to traditional political divisions or categories? In itself it is neither leftist nor rightist, and if we are to believe its spokesmen, it emerges from below and casts the traditional parties of the left and right into a rather unattractive "higher" sphere. The syndrome of populism is found in the context of political demagoguery, organizational instability, economic irresponsibility, and excessive distributive generosity. This syndrome of populism was often found in the 1960s and 1970s, when the military regimes across Latin America prevailed. The symptom reappeared in the 1990s in the same areas when the military attempted to eliminate those traits of populist forces, but populism survived attacks from these authoritarian regimes.

Populist politics unexpectedly reappeared in the 1980s and 1990s. For analytical convenience, populism during this period was really "neopopulism," whereas populism in earlier periods was "classical populism." Classical populism was created as a national road to development. Often it was accompanied by import-substitution industrialization.[3] It aimed to close the national economy off from world economy to prevent penetration into its markets. On the other hand, neopopulism was an adaptation to globalization. Domestic political elites succeeded in gaining power by promising to protect the losers from globalization while accepting global openness as inevitable.

THE RISE OF POPULISM IN KOREA: ROH'S MOBILIZATION AND EXPERIMENTATION WITH "NOSAMO

Populism challenges the political establishment. It is, in the words of Kitschelt (2002, 179), "an expression of dissatisfaction with existing modes of organization of elite-mass political intermediation" "Expression" varies by time and space. Populism in Korea is different in that it was created within the government party itself. Unlike populism elsewhere, it started as a challenge by insiders rather than by outsiders. Institutional change was instrumental in making possible the internal transformation of ruling forces.

Roh's success was also facilitated by structural changes to Korea's electoral system. The seventeenth presidential election of South Korea was the first election held under a new candidate-selection system. The new system obliged political parties to hold primaries in which the party candidate was determined, and these primaries were crucial in making Roh a standard-bearer. Without the primaries, Roh would not have become the party's candidate, without which he could not have won the

presidency either. The Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) held primaries in major cities and provinces, in which party members and non-party citizens cast votes to choose the party candidate. The GNP followed suit.

In addition to these structural changes, Roh's success was also facilitated by "Nosamo." Nosamo, which literally meant "a gathering of people who love Roh Moo-hyun," was an internet-based group organized in 2000 as a fan club for the Roh. The group was critical for Roh's success as it organized and mobilized the masses to express their unyielding support and loyalty to Roh both before and after the 2002 elections. Nosamo despicted Roh as a captain of reform, and called him the "people's candidate." They fought to protect him when some members of the MDP demanded his resignation after the primaries, before the official campaign began. They chanted: "Please, don't shake the people's candidate who was elected by people."

Roh's populist appeal resonated most fervently with the younger generations. Nosamo targeted their efforts to engage this demographic and what started as only 300 members in May 2000, grew to a membership of 70,000 by the 2002 presidential elections, the majority of whom were below the age of fifty. It is particularly unusual to see a fan club for a politician organized in an anti-politics environment, but Roh had remained managed to maintain and an outsider image throughout his political career. "Who's Roh?" was the question on everyone's lips when he won the party nomination in April 2002.

For Roh Moo-hyun, Nosamo was critical for creating power and maintaining it. Nosamo was an indispensable vehicle which allowed him to persevere through and overcome political difficulties. For instance, not only did Nosamo help Roh win the presidential election in 2002, but it also fought for his reinstatement after the two-month suspension of his leadership. Nosamo, the engine of Roh's populist movement, worked to build a collective identity among the unorganized masses, instilling in them the sense of belonging to a movement; thus playing a complementary role to Roh's leadership. Roh, the leader, articulated the values and challenges and created new political idioms. Nosamo, the political organization, in turn, articulated strategies for electoral success, and created the mechanisms through which solidarities and collective identities were generated.

ROH'S POPULIST MOBILIZATION

Conditions were ripe for Roh's populist message. Often, economic crisis forms a backdrop from which populist dissatisfaction starts and populist movements oppose the institutions or procedures that impede the direct expression of the people's voices. This was the case in Korea. Economic crisis enabled Roh's populist challenge to be effective among Korea's masses. He emphasized politics for the common people, and he succeeded in creating a movement that identified him with the slogans, symbols, and goals he embraced, as shown in the activities of Nosamo. He promised to undertake policies that would improve the daily life of common people who had been hit hardest by the 1997 Asian financial crises and were still feeling its effects. These desperate masses were an easy target for Roh to reach. To win their support, Roh promised them economic and social policies tailored to their interests. No other candidate had ever suggested such concrete policies in favor of the poor and working classes. He was also known to be widely anti-*chaebol* and criticized these large conglomerates for being corrupt and irresponsible. He also attacked established politicians, labeling them as the new ruling oligarchy. The MDP, founded by Kim Dae-jung, was no exception. Eventually Roh split from the MDP in order to create his own party, the Uri Party. Roh needed enemies from which to protect his followers, so he forged a link with the people by attacking what he deemed a corrupt political class. His anti-corruption strategy worked to gather votes from all over.

Roh's success was also facilitated by structural weaknesses within Korea's party system as a whole. Established parties lost political legitimacy at the end of the Kim Dae-jung era and distrust of party politics created an opening for an anti-political establishment by outsiders.[4] Populist attack on established party system resulted in deconstruction of the old system. How-

ever, populism failed to institutionalize party politics. Roh was able to reach the working class because no comparable political party existed to represent them. Labor unions and the working class had been subsumed by regionally based parties in a regional party system. In a state with no labor party, Roh's populist strategy provided an overarching identity to unify the lower classes.

Roh sought support from a wide range of social strata, but he appealed to some of them in particular. He gave priority to mobilizing workers and lower-middle sectors. However, financial crisis challenged him to reach below these strata. A contextual factor favoring Roh's election was the expansion of the informal sector after the financial crisis. Appeal to employees in an informal economy is a peculiar character found in neopopulism.[5]

Increasing inequality tended also to be favorable to Roh. The growing lower class expanded the number of poorer voters, who were attracted to Roh's populist platform. Unemployed workers also supported Roh, who had promised them more benefits. Income inequality had been worsening before the presidential election. The Gini Coefficient, an indicator of income disparity, rose to 0.314 between 2000 and 2003, up from 0.293 in the 1990s. The closer the indicator gets to 1, the larger the income disparity between the rich and the poor. This shows that the imbalance in income distribution in Korea had worsened since the financial turmoil in late 1990s. The widening income gap played to Roh's advantage. To gain more votes from the marginalized sectors, Roh approached the people below the poverty line, just as Carlos Menem appealed to the *descamisados* (shirtless people) had done to become president of Argentina.

Third, Roh emphasized the divisions between "us" and "them" to mobilize his followers. Populists emphasize dichotomy between the people and the non-people. "Non-people" refers to vested interests involving the political elite, the oligarchy, foreigners, and traitors. Roh often criticized the rich and the educated for privatizing public interests in Korean society, such that inequality grew wider and deeper. The big division in South Korea concerned the role of the rich and powerful, and the perceived injustices and inequalities that emerged as the country has grown. For instance, Roh criticized the *chaebols*, the giant family conglomerates that drove the country's rapid development and still dominate its business landscape. Before and after taking office, Roh pledged to make South Korean politics more "horizontal" and less hierarchical.

NATIONAL REFERNDUM, DIRECT APPEAL, AND IMPEACHMENT

One common constitutive element of populism is its direct appeal to the people (Taggart 2000). Populism is hostile to representative politics. What differentiates populism from other forms of democracy is its preference for referendums, which allows populists to go to the people directly. Populism encourages direct democracy and discourages traditional representative politics. Proponents of liberal democracy tend to blame populists for bypassing representative institutions, such as parliament and political parties. They argue that populists are more likely to pursue policies with an eye toward immediate publicity instead of long-range policy impact. As E. E. Shattschneider, an American political scientist, stated fifty years ago, democracy is "unthinkable" without parties. Where the party system is more institutionalized, parties are key actors that structure the political process; where it is less institutionalized, parties are not so dominant, they do not structure the political process much, and less institutionalized politics tend to be more unpredictable. Referendums are part of populist politics because they ignore the role of political parties to mediate between state and society. Roh went for a national referendum to break the stalemate arising from the divided government with a minority in the National Assembly.

This massive populist mobilization after Roh took office resembled the one during the election campaign. The occasion was provided by the parliament, which tried to impeach the president in March 2004. He was charged for saying that he would do whatever was possible to help his party, the Uri Party, gain seats in the election. This charge seemed so ridiculous that Roh

was expected to come back. But within hours of the vote, Roh was out of office and the prime minister stepped in as temporary head of state. The impeachment motion was handed to the Constitutional Court. As in the electoral campaign, ardent young supporters initiated protests against his impeachment and succeeded in mobilizing tens of thousands of Roh's supporters. Pro-Roh people took to the streets in anger when the two opposition parties passed the impeachment vote, defying common sense. Roh challenged the parliament to impeach him by holding a defiant press conference where he said: "I cannot avoid the responsibility for the act of my former secretary. I will put this issue to the people before the upcoming general elections." The Constitutional Court dismissed the charge on which Roh's opponents had impeached him. The impeachment issue helped the Uri Party triple its representation by winning a majority (152) of the 299 parliamentary seats in the parliamentary election.

Even before he was impeached by parliament, Roh turned to the masses directly. Direct appeal instead of institutional bargaining or compromise is a traditional means of populist mobilization. Similar methods are often used by Latin American populists. Populist leadership in Latin America tends to be identified with the nation as a whole, or *el pueblo* in its struggle against *la oligarquia.* The leader is supposed to guarantee the fulfillment of popular aspirations and wishes.[6] Roh's plan to hold a national referendum can be understood in a similar vein. If the people reconfirmed their support for him and his policies, the opposition would have to be silent. If not, Roh would resign. To overcome the criticism of the opposition with a majority in parliament, he tried to rely on political mobilization.

Roh had proposed a national referendum as a way to push through political difficulties. He argued that new politics should replace old politics, by which he meant corruption, hierarchy, regional cleavages, and money politics. Institutionalized politics, in general, functions to serve the vested interests, and therefore needs to be eliminated. Thus, he essentially asked the nation whether or not it could trust him as head of state while his popularity continued to decline due to a series of scandals around his close aides.[7] Scandals had marred his eight months in office, and driven the president to take drastic action. His approval ratings hovered around 10 percent, which was a record low for any president in the first year of his term. Roh's decision to hold a referendum should be understood against this backdrop.

The president's proposal for a national referendum divided the nation into two camps: pro-Roh versus anti-Roh. His supporters sought to revive the Roh-tempest that occurred during the presidential campaign. This time they aimed at "saving president Roh." The establishment became the target of demagogic discourse, accused of corruption, irresponsibility, and incompetence. On the other hand, opposition parties dismissed Roh's proposal for a confidence vote as a strategic move to overcome political difficulties arising from the scandals.

However, the populist referendum proposed by Roh was highly controversial because of questions about its constitutionality. Article 72 of the South Korean Constitution stipulates that the head of state shall refer only important policies relating to diplomacy, national defense, unification, and other matters relating to the national destiny to a public vote. Thus the range of policies that were potentially eligible for referendum was limited. This implied that if Roh wanted to press forward with the referendum, that the Constitution itself would have to be amended. However, Roh's proposal worked to consolidate his supporters' confidence in him, and polls showed that 52.4 percent would give a vote of confidence in Roh's presidency. Thus, proposing the referendum was highly effective in consolidating Roh's supporters as a group.

Despite great strides in democratization over the past decade, Korea has failed to develop institutional checks and balances. In the absence of well-institutionalized separation of powers, patrimonial practices often prevail, and the legislature tends to be weak. Presidents in South Korea have remained imperial and that tradition showed even in Roh's rule. Like previous presidents, Roh had overwhelming authority as president. That power was unintentionally on display at the new president's inauguration, during which he stood at the podium alone, raised his right hand, and in effect, administered the oath of office

to himself. No Supreme Court judge, national assembly leader, or other figure of authority stood with him to symbolize the separation of powers. The event looked akin to a coronation, only one where the Korean president walks over to the crown, picks it up, and places it on his own head.

Not only were constraints on imperial presidents weak, but Korean leaders, big and small and in all walks of life, have traditionally had a strong tendency to discredit all who had served before them. In addition, the weak party system of South Korea provided presidents with ample maneuvering space to engineer populist strategies. Less attached to or constrained by a party, populist leaders are more likely to violate the unspoken rules of the game, the result of which, is that a vicious cycle easily erupts; the lack of solid parties creates greater space for populists, who then govern without attempting to create more solid institutions, thereby perpetuating a weak system.

GAINING SUPPORT

Supporters for Roh were drawn from three different sources. First, Roh's victory was largely rooted in a cleavage between old and young. Younger voters were more likely to vote for Roh and his party, whereas older voters were more likely to vote for the more conservative party candidates. Electoral results showed the generational cleavage to be particularly acute in the political sphere. Those in their twenties and thirties made up 47 percent of the 35.6 million eligible voters; people over fifty only 30 percent. Demographically, this was potentially a huge advantage for the Uri Party, although in reality, the effects of this were slightly muted due to lower turnout rates among the younger voters. Much of Roh's support came from voters in their thirties and forties who were fed up with money politics and scandals. Generational cleavage is associated with South Korea's rapid economic development. This compressed economic development exacerbated the normal generational differences found elsewhere in the world. South Koreans over sixty had endured years of back-breaking work to push the country into the ranks of developed nations.

The election of Roh Moo-hyun, aged fifty-six at the time, represented a generational shift in Korea's political landscape, giving South Korean democracy yet another lift. All three political leaders who had ruled the country during the previous fifteen years were already established political figures back in 1987, and over the past decade the electorate had become bored with that older generation. Roh as a political outsider seemed to breathe fresh air into politics, tapping into new, younger supporters, and bringing an array of outsiders into government to get his message across in new and innovative ways.

A generational shift took place in public life right after Roh was elected. Power was shared by the people in their thirties and forties who, while at university in the 1980s, spearheaded the country's democracy movement. This reformist generation is replaced the larger-than-life political bosses who had dominated the country's politics for decades.

However, policy alone did not determine the outcome of the election. The second source of Roh's support was associated with regional cleavage. Roh needed votes not just from the Jeolla region, the MDP's political base in the southwest, but also from the area around Busan, his hometown in the southeast, where voters had turned him down in parliamentary elections just two years before. His campaign message was that, as an MDP man born outside Jeolla, only he could help to end regional animosity and integrate a divided South Korea into one nation.

Voters in the Jeolla region had traditionally voted for the party with which Kim Dae-jung was associated. That party should have been strong enough to compete with a political party based in the Gyeongsang region in the southeast. The Jeolla voters thus, should have been more likely to vote for Roh and the Uri Party. Roh was committed to continuing Kim's Sunshine Policy of engagement with the North. Whereas the GNP's candidate, the opposition party based in the Gyeongsang region, had called for aid to be halted until the North dismantled its uranium-enrichment program.

Third, supporters for Roh were more likely to be progressive and liberal than other voters. Ideological progressiveness is closely related to generational change. Vastly differing experiences between old and young have led to ideological conflict. Older South Koreans, who had to live through the Korean civil war, were more likely to be fiercely anti-communist and pro-American. In contrast, young South Koreans formed the core of anti-American demonstrations, which punctuated public life in the country. They were generally in favor of closer ties with their neighbors in the North. Roh's social policy was particularly progressive. Unusual for a presidential candidate in technocratic South Korea, Roh came from humble beginnings. He did not attend college but became a lawyer specializing in human-rights. He pledged to reduce the gap between rich and poor and rein in the country's *chaebols*. Roh pledged more government spending on welfare while his GNP opponent was pro-business and proposed tax cuts for corporations and high income earners. In dealing with the intransigent North Korea, Roh promised to continue the wooing the regime with unconditional aid, while his opponent insisted on strict reciprocity.

Roh's constituents were from the low and middle classes. His economic and labor policies emphasized social solidarity as well as market economy to keep his supporters close to him. His pro-labor attitude had been fairly widely known since the late 1980s and he stressed the need to protect the interests of the working class vis-à-vis big employers. Roh was a complete outsider to the traditional political society of South Korea. Not many people had expected him to win the presidential candidacy of the governing Millennium Democratic Party. Roh's humble beginnings made him a nontraditional politician, as most other Korean politicians had come from more or less elites in both family and educational background, and he worked hard to continue that image. From the beginning, part of Roh's appeal was his pledge to work for the less privileged and the common people.

Roh won the election, though only by a thin margin. The election was highlighted by a sharp division along generational lines as well as by traditional regional cleavages. Roh put himself across as a principled man for ordinary people. He tried to label his opponent, Lee Hoi-chang, as an unprincipled defender of conservative elites. During the campaign, he promised to end corruption and to work towards ending the regional rivalries that have divided the country for decades.

The populist tendency is also found in Roh's foreign policy. Populists stir national pride among the masses, for whom populism becomes the equivalent of nationalism. Roh attempted to make his foreign policy independent of U.S. influence. Both the MDP and the GNP wanted South Korea to maintain its close relationship with the United States, but Roh was ambivalent about whether to allow American troops to stay on when or if the two Koreas were to reunite. However, Roh's nationalist orientation changed direction when he worked on the free-trade agreement with the United States. He believed that it would reactivate the Korean economy and facilitate economic reform, particularly in the service economy. This turn of events forces us to classify the Roh regime as neopopulist rather than classical populist due to its adaptation to globalization. Roh's attempted to sustain his populist influence over the public by promising to protect "losers" in the global economy from globalization, but his free trade agreement negotiations were a resignation to the fact that market opening and globalization were essentially, inevitable. However, this did not go over well with his supporters.

POPULISM AND NEOLIBERALISM IN THE GLOBAL AGE

No one doubts that Mr. Roh's election was a big step forward in Korean democracy. His campaign brought common people into the political community and his populist challenge got the masses to walk out on the streets to fight for their rights and their leaders. Common people in South Korea for the first time in history exerted their citizenship rights to the state. He made promises to deliver a labor-friendly government and to favor a fairer distribution of wealth. His promises, if carried out, meant big changes for the country's large family-run industrial *chaebols*, whose unchecked expansion led to a slump five years ago.

Whatever his intents may have been, Roh proved to be extraordinarily effective in reaching masses of voters, whom he convinced to cast ballots for him. But his political success also implies the insufficiency of democratic transition during the last decade in South Korea. Despite the three Kims' exits from politics, democratic processes had not been in place to allow the masses to participate in decision-making. They had not believed themselves engaged in democratic politics. The Roh regime mirrors Latin American populist regimes in some characteristics. It is politically populist in the classical sense, but economically neoliberal in terms of market-oriented structural adjustments.[8] He criticized the 3-8-6 generation, a powerful group of Roh's collaborators, for being too politically oriented in handling economic affairs, rather than being focused on upgrading productivity. This mix of populism and neoliberalism was found in Latin America in 1980s and 1990s;[9] examples include Peru's Fujimori (1990-97) and Argentina's Menem (1989-99).

Roh's electoral campaign seemed to be quite populist in that it effectively incorporated the working and lower-middle classes into the political process. However, his economic and social policy failed to serve the interests of his constituents once he was elected. He successfully utilized the existing opportunities to get elected, but then skillfully adopted his policy to the changing realities that constrained his promises. Trade unions were no longer in his scope; on the contrary, they are seen as pursuers of narrow private interests that need to be stamped out. Unions were characterized as "labor aristocrats"; they served their own regular workers, and tended to ignore unorganized irregular employees. Roh targeted unorganized employees in the informal sector, including part-time and irregular workers whose income and status were very inferior to regular union workers. Ironically, Roh's attack on regular workers was welcomed by the *chaebol*s who opposed union demands for high wages. Large firms preferred a flexible labor market so they can employ irregular workers at cheap wages. Roh had promised to build a better world for workers but then demanded that union workers curb their demands for high wages, so that firms could be competitive. Thus, the president's words were not turned into deeds, even after parliament was under control of his Uri Party.
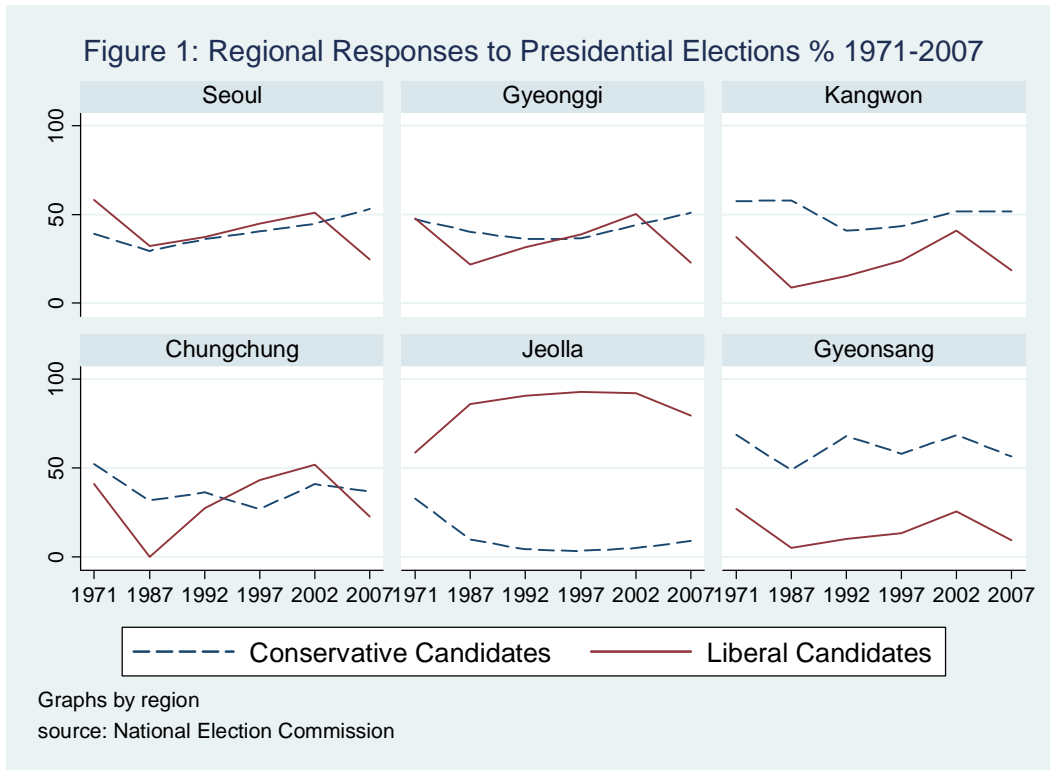
This disconnect between promises and deeds is often found in neopopulism, where import-substitution industrialization (ISI) policies were put into place to implement new, neoliberal development policies in Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina. As inequality and heterogeneous social structures provided a fertile ground for the rise of populism in Latin America in the 1980s and 1990s, economic hardships resulting from the financial crisis produced a precondition for the emergence of Roh in Korea.

One of the biggest issues for Roh in achieving the political development of South Korea was the institutionalization of the party system. Democracy cannot be said to be solid unless party system is institutionalized (O'Donnell 1991). For the Roh government, one important job to be handled was to institutionalize the party system that he actually helped to break. His creation of a new party (the Uri Party) to push through political reform and end regional cleavage set South Korea's political party system back in time and the implication of new parties still emerging is that the party system remains unstable. It is paradoxical to see regional conflict more acute after Roh took office.

CONSERVATIVE BACKLASH AGAINST POPULIST CHALLENGE

A populist decade from 1998 to 2007 resulting in an interlude to conservative hegemony in Korea. Conservative rule had long prevailed in Korean politics except for the last decade. No liberal regimes had succeeded in capturing the presidency until the 1997 election, when Kim Dae-jung won the presidency. The term "backlash" here refers to the noted outbursts of public frustration with liberal rhetoric without substantial policy contents in favor of the middle and lower classes. The magnitude of the electoral realignment demonstrated in the 2007 presidential and the 2008 parliamentary elections reconfirmed how strong and solid conservative rule remained in Korea. Figure 1 shows regional acceptance of both conservative and liberal candidates in the past years. Voting results show that conservative predominance reemerged in the 2007 presidential elec-

tion returns. A universal decline of support for Chung Dong-young, the candidate of the liberal camp, was clear across all regions. However, regional divides with regard to leading candidates are still prevalent, as shown in the Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces.

Figure 1: Regional Responses to Presidential Elections % 1971-2007

Graphs by region
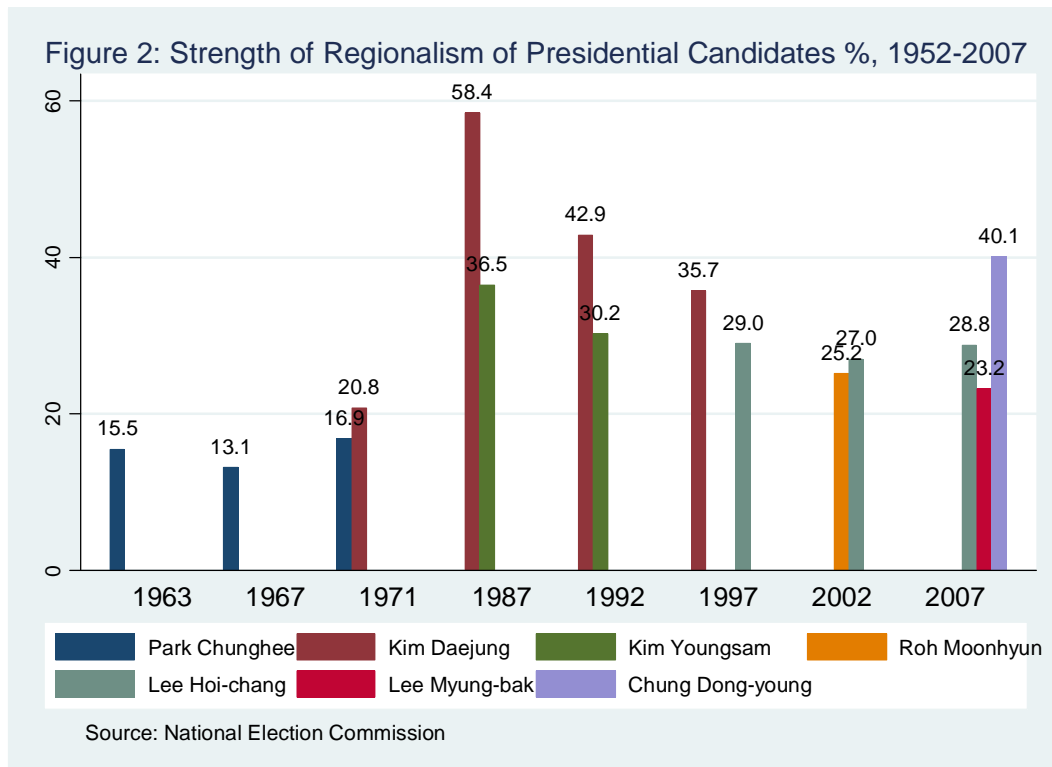source: National Election Commission

Defeat of the liberal elites was already predictable from local election results in May 2006. Roh's populist policy lost ground in the countryside where the governing party experienced crushing defeats. The opposition rival party, another regional party, gained a landslide victory, the biggest in Korean elections. That election, though local, was regarded as an opportunity to judge the performance of the Roh administration in three years. His populist policy had succeeded not in fostering greater equity, but in widening the gap between the haves and have-nots, polarizing society more acutely rather than narrowing the societal divide. Those policies contributed to widening the gap between regular employees and atypical workers, between rich family-dominated conglomerates and smaller struggling businesses, and between prosperous Seoul and the neglected regions. Those inequalities are what Roh and his party consistently claimed to lessen, but in fact, after Roh's presidency, workers at smaller firms earned only three fifths of what their counterparts earned at big corporations, and irregular workers earned much less than regular ones (see figure 4).

Pursuit of a free-trade agreement with the United States was another factor that contributed to the May local elections. The Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA) is believed to hurt Korea's protected sectors, including farmers, industrial groupings and trade unions, and the film industry, and was seen as a betrayal of the very constituencies that had supported Roh's rise to power. Large protests, which had once been used to support Roh's efforts, were organized against him to block the government from promoting the agreement.

As shown in the results of the 2007 presidential election, regional cleavage did not lessen under the Roh regime either. Figure 2 indicates the extent to which the support for candidates in previous presidential elections was distributed across regions.

The extent varies from zero to 100; the higher the number, the stronger the regionalism. Figure 2 shows that the degree of regionally biased support in the last election was highest in the votes for Chung Dong-young, the candidate who would have continued Roh's liberal incumbency. In contrast, it was lowest for the conservative GNP's candidate, Lee Myung-bak.

A regional party system occurs when one-party politics becomes predominant in each particular region, such that other parties based in different regions are completely excluded. What makes regional voting occur and consolidate over time? To understand this feature, we must first place it in historical context—specifically the modern twin processes of industrialization and democratization.

Figure 2: Strength of Regionalism of Presidential Candidates %, 1952-2007

Source: National Election Commission

Industrialization, led by former president Park Chung-hee, showed a geographical bias toward the Gyeongsang area (North and South Gyeongsang provinces). Uneven development occurred and is still prevalent between the southwest (Jeolla) and southeast (Gyeongsang). As a result, gross regional production differs widely. Figure 3 presents the clear difference between Jeolla (North and South Jeolla provinces) and Gyeongsang in the level of gross regional domestic product. Gross regional product was about 270 percent higher in the Gyeongsang region than in the Jeolla area between 1985 and 2005.

From a political perspective, regionalism is revealed in coherent voting behavior that consistently and overwhelmingly supports a regionally based political party. A regional party system is created as regional voting predominates across a nation. This sort of regionalism is not limited to just a few countries or specific historical periods, it is found in many countries, such as the United States and Italy. The differences lie in the extent or degree of regionalism. Regional competition is tremendously intense in Korea, where regionally based parties have alternated in governing the nation since 1987, while keeping other regions from securing power. The electoral predominance of regionally favored candidates in the Gyeongsang and Jeolla provinces is highlighted in figure 1.

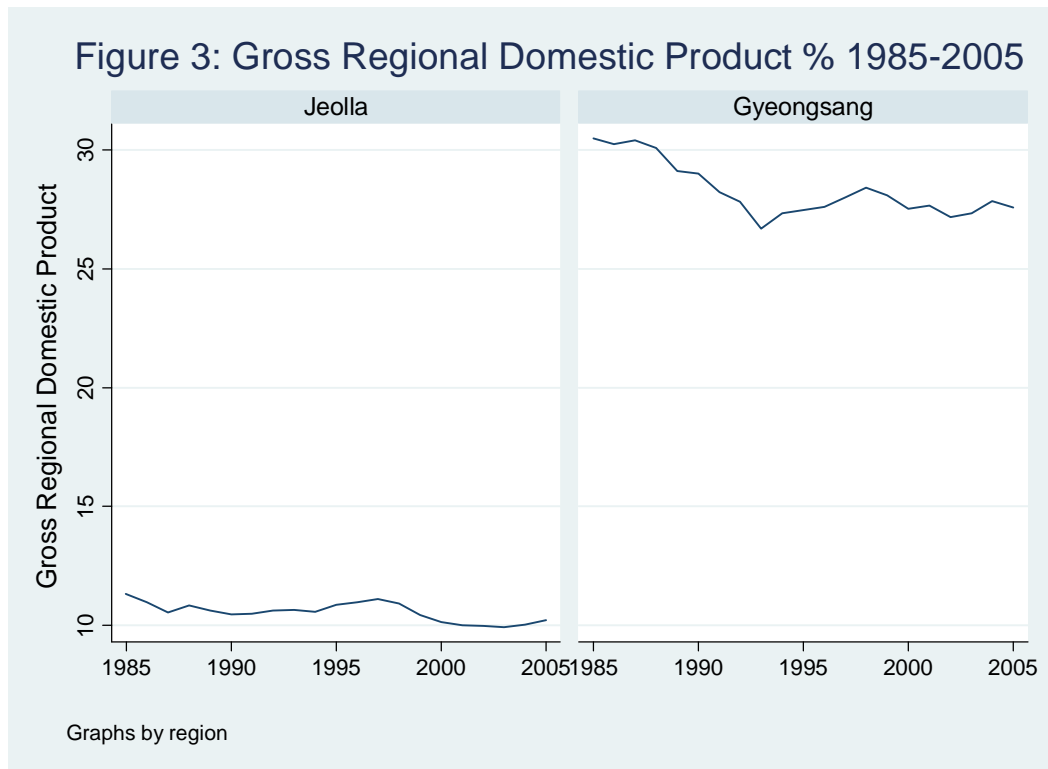Figure 3: Gross Regional Domestic Product % 1985-2005

Figure 1 presents the political duopoly in the southern part of the nation during the last five presidential elections. In the Seoul area, electoral competition between the two major parties is highly competitive. Two different parties, which have been based in the Gyeongsang and Jeolla regions, have competed in various elections, though the party leaders and names have often changed. Park Chung-hee, Roh Tae-woo, Kim Young-sam, Lee Hoi-chang, and Lee Myung-bak were all presidential candidates from the conservative Gyeongsang area. On the other hand, Kim Dae-jung, Roh Moo-hyun, and Chung Dong-young were all liberal candidates.

Each party was able to monopolize electoral support in both the presidential and parliamentary elections. The striking partisan voting is evident in both Jeolla and Gyeongsang areas since 1987. The presidential candidates from the south, either west or east, alternated in occupying the presidential office at the Blue House. Both regional parties have won sweeping victories in their regions. In the 2007 presidential election, Chung, the liberal candidate representing the Jeolla region, took about 90 percent from the southwest, while receiving only 9 percent from the Gyeongsang area. Thus, we observed a similar pattern to that found in previous elections, as highlighted in figures 1 and 2.

This is also reflected in the shrinking population of the Jeolla region. The people in this area have migrated to other industrialized areas to look for jobs and higher incomes. The people in the Jeolla area are mostly employed in agriculture rather than manufacturing. The employment share of agriculture in Jeolla provinces is much larger than the national average.

In contrast, industrial employment in the Gyeongsang area is larger than in any other area in the country, reflecting the economic development over decades that facilitated industrial concentration in the southeastern region. The economic gap between the southeast and the southwest has persisted to generate relative underdevelopment in the southwest, providing a potential fertile ground for the opposition.

Kim Dae-jung was able to win the presidential nomination four times thanks to absolute support from his home region. He

succeeded in skillfully mobilizing the southwestern voters to promote his political ambitions. Crucial momentum was also gained through political trauma. It came in 1980 when Chun Doo-hwan, another military dictator from Gyeongsang, ruthlessly repressed the democratic aspirations of the Jeolla people, led by Kim Dae-jung. The painful experience in the spring of 1980 reinforced the regional solidarity of the Jeolla region.

In the 2007 election, regional voting was still strong. As mentioned before, almost 90 percent of voters in the Jeolla area voted for Chung Dong-young. In contrast, Lee Myung-bak gained only 8.5 percent in Jeolla provinces. The voting went back to the regional party system in which conservative rule had long prevailed before the 1997 financial panic. Again, we have the "Solid South" proving highly resilient in the election.

However, beyond regionalism, economic matters have proven to be extremely influential in South Korean politics. Voters in the 2007 election were believed to be primarily concerned about economic conditions and economic motivations influenced political behavior more profoundly than in previous elections. Economic interests—such as the number of jobs available and the level of disposable income—were believed to be the key factors in mobilizing voters to support an electoral shift. In his well-known 1906 book, *Why Is There No Socialism in the United States?*, German sociologist Werner Sombart advanced this famous thesis: "All socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie." The behavior of Korean voters mirrored this.

Figure 4: Polarizning Korea, 1979-2006

source: Government Statistical Office
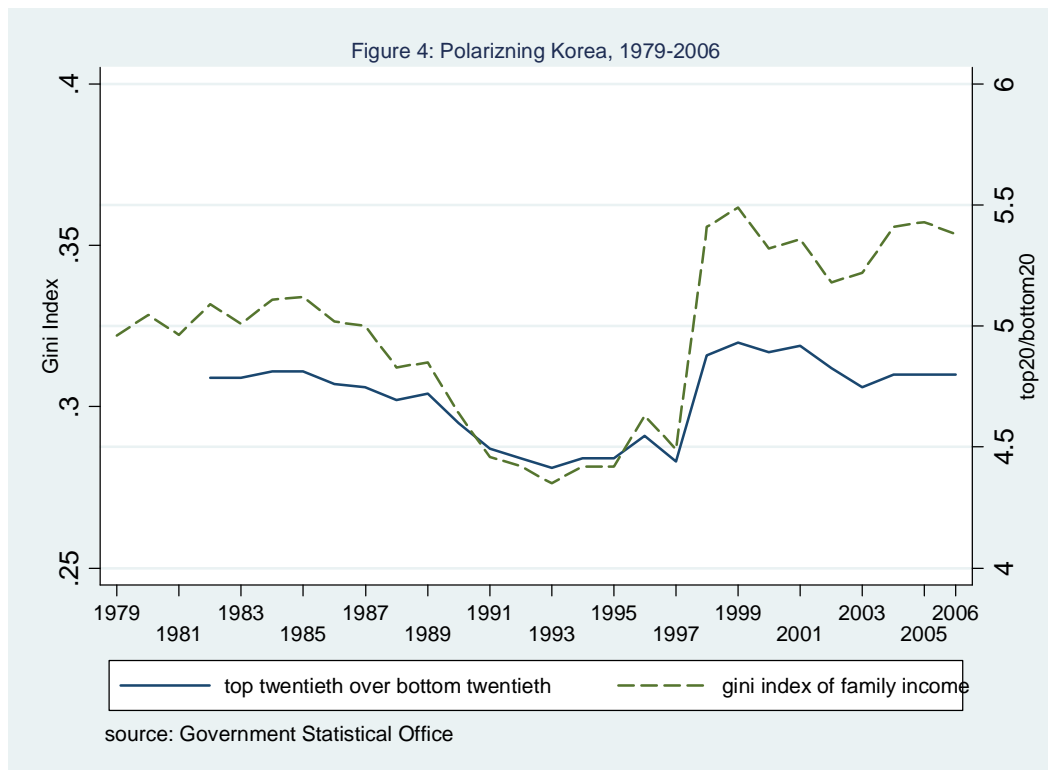
How will the transformation of the Solid South come about? Regionalism is said to be a formidable barrier to the electoral competition necessary for a truly democratic polity. Party politics need to be constructed on the basis of policy competition pursued by the political parties. But despite some skepticism, regional confrontation appears to be losing its traditional capacity to shape party politics. As electoral results show, social polarization was responsible for the defeat of Chung Dong-young. The Roh government, criticized for being unfriendly to business and investment, was blamed for killing the golden goose. Irregular workers, the unemployed, and the disadvantaged believed that the Roh government had not attempted to help them survive

through the hard times. The failure to create employment resulted in growing social polarization and contributed to Lee Myung -bak's landslide victory as liberals crossed party lines as commentary on Roh's policy choices. They felt alienated and frustrated.

This inequality is referred to as social polarization. Social polarization means that the middle class is vanishing. Economic and social inequities have continued to widen during the early 2000s. There is a large and growing group of irregular or atypical employees who work similar jobs to those of regular employees but with far lower pay. Unskilled workers and the unem-ployed have no viable political parties that promote their concerns.

The middle class, which was an important constituent of the Roh government, has deteriorated into the lower class, such that they are now thinking differently when making their electoral decisions. Their primary concern is more opportunities for regular jobs. Thus, they have paid little attention to the engagement policy toward the North, which the Roh government, following the lead of President Kim Dae-jung, had pursued as a top priority.

The key campaign strategy of liberal candidate Chung Dong-young was to emphasize that he was a co-designer of the peace policy with Roh, particularly highlighting the Gaesung project. This strategy was well off the mark, culminating in the exodus of traditional constituencies that had long provided the political foothold for the governing party and ending in the defeat of the liberals. Their future votes will determine the durability of the realignment made possible by Lee. Realignment will not last long unless substantial measures are taken to reduce social polarization.

In the present plurality electoral systems, candidates of the two major parties are usually victorious. This now stagnant party system based on regionalism will revive if proportional representation systems—rather than plurality or first-past-the-post systems—are used. Optimal voting formats can create multiparty systems in which four or five parties, at least, will compete. Proportional representation rules fit this reality of multiparty competition. In PR systems, small- and medium-sized parties are able to win seats. Some of these parties within parliament will attempt to protect low-income and unstable constituencies. Other parties—such as the Liberty Forward Party created by Lee Hoi-chang—will represent the extreme conservative constituencies. In proportional representation systems, partisan competition can finally replace regional competition.

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[1] Weyland (2001) provides a useful discussion on conceptual ambiguity or confusion in academic community during the past decades. He introduces three types of definitional strategies: cumulation, addition, and redefinition. He prefers to redefine populism by differentiate the politically relevant from other residuals. Redefinition of populism is similar to one adopted in my analysis. See Meny and Surel (2002) more for a conceptual survey of the concept of populism.

[2] A study argues to limit the range of research on populism to leadership. Michael L. Conniff, 1999, p. 2.

[3] See Dornbusch and Edwards (1991) for economic interpretation of populism. They highlight an economic path passing through dis-cernable states of populism.

[4] Mainwaring and Scully (1995).

[5] Weyland (1996) argues special appeal to the informal sector as one of main characteristics of neopopulism differentiating it from classi-cal populism.

[6] De la Torre (1992), p. 387; Knight (1998).

[7] Roh's image of clean politics was damaged by bribery scandals discovered right after taking office. Choi, Roh's friend of more than 20 years and the manager of his campaign funds, was suspected of receiving 1 billion won from SK group just after the election in December 2002.

[8] Pereira, Maravall, and Prezworski 1993; Roberts 1995; Ellner 2003.

[9] Roberts, 1995; Weylands 2001.

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