The Phenomenon of Political 'Fan Clubs' in the Republic of Korea: Key Features and Implications

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ABSTRACT

This article is focused on the problems of the development of so-called 'political fan clubs' as a peculiar form of civil society and political participation in the contemporary Republic of Korea. With a reference to the phenomena of political clientelism and political populism, the article argues that the rise of political fan clubs has been a result of an interplay between the pre-established South Korean tradition of political clientelism and the more contemporary brand of populism which has spread to South Korea as well. The theoretical foundation of this article is concerned with linking the insights regarding the relationship between clientelism and populism as a form of political participation while using the case of South Korea as an empirical material. In so doing, the ambivalence of the phenomenon of political fan clubs and their further implications for the development of electoral democracy in South Korea have been duly considered. As it has been shown that the political fan clubs often need an organizational basis in order to have a permanently stable connection, it follows that populist and clientelist ties are mixed up. These politician fan clubs then do not represent an alternative to political clientelism, but rather complement the existing clientelist model of political participation.

KEYWORDS: civil society, political participation, populism, clientelism, fan clubs, Republic of Korea

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Introduction. In recent decades, populism has become a buzzword in the political arena. The guiding principle of populism is an absolute priority of the general will of the people (Mudde, 2004, p. 543), while its downside is a radical disengagement from the established elites. The people are "an empty signifier" (Laclau, 2007, pp. 36-40) emerging from two mutually dependent and hostile camps (the people and the elites) (cf. Nam, 2021). On this basis, political demands and programs are remixed and bundled so that the common distinction between left and right spectrum is blurred (Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). The populist mobilization process is characterized by the simplicity of the line of conflict and the flexibility of the programs. Hence, populism functions as a diffuse notion of anti-establishment struggle on all fronts (Barr, 2009; Laclau, 2005; Mudde, 2004). Populist movements can promote or destroy democracy in all phases of political forms of government (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 87). The openness and uncertainty of populist movements suggest that both the initial situation of populism and its further trajectories should be clearly charted. This then results in substantial orientations and programs of populism.

Against this background, the present article intends to explore the case of populism in the Republic of Korea. The country has left colonial times (1910-1945) and the devastation of war (1950-1953) behind and has meanwhile integrated into the global society. Parallel to social, political, and economic ruptures caused by external forces, the social dynamics of modern South Korea are characterized by the juxtaposition and hybridity of modernity and tradition. The case study helps, first, to illustrate the interplay of populism with entrenched tradition, and second, to present the differences in that interplay. In this context, the present study will treat the case of so-called 'political fan clubs' as integral part of the South Korean political system. It should be noted that the term "fan club" was adopted from the popular cultures of the 1990s after the democratic opening. In an empirical study by Kenny (2017, pp. 189-190), the South Korean system is classified in the category of "patronage democracies" (1988–2012). An exception here is the classification of South Korea as "ambiguous" (neither patronage nor non-patronage democracies) in the period from 2005 to 2012. From this it can be inferred that existing patronage networks around the year 2000 were neither damaged nor dismantled. The explosive question raised after the democratic opening, on the other hand, concerns the further careers of the activists, groups and opposition politicians who actively participated in the movement. One direction is toward a professional political arena, while the other direction is toward newly established intermediary organizations under the umbrella of civil society. In the 1990s, media attention was completely focused on the rapid growth of civil society organizations. When the young consumers of popular music called themselves "fan clubs" and organized themselves collectively, this new form of youth culture received a lot of media attention in South Korea. The emergence of political fan clubs would thus transfer the relationship between fans and pop stars in the mass culture field to the relationship between voters and politicians in the political field (Nam, 2019). Consequently, it will be fruitful to explore what the results of that transfer were and how the rise and proliferation of political fan clubs have impacted the South Korean political life, especially as far as political participation is concerned.

Literature Review. The theoretical considerations on the linking of populism and clientelism are based on the multiple modernities approach, which states that clientelism does not disappear in modernity, but rather coexists with it (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984). Further, the coexistence of newly developed populism and existing clientelism is not uncommon in modernity. Hence, Mouzelis (1985) advocates the thesis that both populism and clientelism are to be regarded as equivalent modes of association for political inclusion. In electoral democracy, voters (clients) receive everyday goods, benefits, and services through local and regional intermediaries (brokers). In return, they demonstrate their respect, loyalty and gratitude to the top politician (patron) by casting their vote (Mouzelis, 1985). The participation in the elections of the clientelistically networked citizens can almost be interpreted as a ritual action (Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1984). The populist movement, on the other hand, maintains a hostile relationship between ″we″ (the people) and ″those above″ (the elites; Barr, 2009). Hardly any space is given to local or regional politicians, because the mediating broker is rather detrimental to the dichotomous worldview. Sympathetic citizens, usually relegated to the lower ranks as the silent majority or non-voters out of protest in public, would then abruptly participate in the political process (such as street protests or elections) and raise their voices against the established elites (Mouzelis, 1985; Kitschelt, 2000).

If both populism and clientelism belong to the mode of association, i.e. to political inclusion, analytical categories can be applied to both modes. First, material incentives can be used selectively. A bond with the party develops among the citizens who have received a benefit from it and have secured advantages for themselves. The second strategy relies on making political programs attractive and thus involving citizens in their political decision-making processes (Theobald, 1992; Kitschelt, 2000). The third strategy appeals to citizens through charismatic leaders (Nam, 2021). Since they are neither placed in the temporal linearity of tradition to modernity nor placed in the normative axis of democratic vs. undemocratic values, these analytical categories can be suitable for the comparative presentation of populism and clientelism (Kitschelt, 2000). The constant use of material incentives, programmatic orientation and charismatic appeals results in scope for political mobilization that can be described as clientelist or populist (Nam, 2019). When it comes to material incentives, the difference between populism and clientelism seems perfectly clear. In clientelism, leaders (e.g. top politicians) create material incentives aimed at their constituents. The material incentives are redistributed to the grassroots population by regional politicians or sub-organizations. These networks can also take on welfare work within communities. In contrast, material aspects play less of a role in populist networks (Kitschelt, 2000). With regard to their programmatic orientation, clientelist actors need neither develop political programs nor necessarily keep their election promises. With populism, however, a diffuse and simplified program comes to the fore in which “we” (the people) take the establishment as a projection screen (Theobald, 1992). Value orientations such as fundamental rights or popular sovereignty are appealed to for the collective ties of the people, as clientelist voters act out of a sense of duty to a leader. In contrast, in a populist movement, a charismatic leader plays an important role as a saviour (Nam, 2017;

2021). Altogether, these considerations can be considered in order to both underscore a similarity between clientelism and populism and assess the underlying difference between the two.

Methodology. Accordingly, this study will rely on the aforementioned theoretical framework to treat the phenomenon of political fan clubs in South Korea, with the focus on the case study of the 'Politician Fan Club Nosamo", which emerged after the 2002 presidential election out of the ranks of the supporters of the presidential candidate Roh Moo-hyun. In addition, other cases of similar 'fan clubs' in recent South Korean history will be subject to analysis. Since then, Nosamo has often been held up as the first example of a populist political association in Korean social movements (Kimura, 2009; Jenkins, Sriram, & Choi, 2016; Nam, 2019). The emergence of the politician fan club can be traced back to the political and social consequences of the democratic opening. The democratization movement at the end of the 1980s is seen as a liberation from the old authoritarian regimes that had justified their military-backed rule for more than three decades with severely restricted electoral democracy. The ruling elites come almost exclusively from a region in the south-east of the country, while the opposition politicians tend to come from the south-west. These regionalist networks are based on affiliations to the same educational organization, blood relatives, and region of origin. It follows that, for decades, citizens from the south-east region have been intensely favoured in social life, while those from the south-west have been severely disadvantaged. Contrary to expectations, little has changed in the regionalist split in civilian governments, making the emergence of Nosamo a manifestation of the discontented South Korean citizens' response to that situation (Nam, 2019; Jenkins, Sriram, & Choi, 2016). Thus the following case study analysis will explore the impact of Nosamo on the relationship between politics and civil society in the Republic of Korea, with a particular emphasis being placed on the notion of political participation.

Results. When the self-proclaimed "Politician Fan Club Nosamo" was founded, the term "Politician Fan Club" was a novelty as a form of civic participation in South Korea. The first characteristic of populism is the protagonist. As the group name Nosamo (the abbreviation of "those who love Roh Moo-hyun" in Korean) indicates, the focus of the movement is one person, Roh Moo-hyun (Nam, 2019). Although he belongs to the elite as a lawyer and politician, he is an outsider within the establishment. Since he made his first career as a lawyer by passing the state examination without a university education, he has no connection to elite educational networks (Nam, 2017). Even though Roh comes from a south-eastern region that was privileged in the old regime, the abolition of clientelist-regional voting pattern was the primary goal of his political career. Due to his anti-elitist attitude towards the clientelist establishment, however, Roh was side-lined within his own party. The bond between Roh and his followers is thus based on the one hand on his political orientation and on the other hand on his personal traits (Lee, 2008). His down-to-earth rhetoric and anti-authoritarian leadership style stand in sharp contrast to the authoritarian establishment and serve to ensure fans see him as both "one of us" versus the elites and as a charismatic leader.

The second salient characteristic of Roh's 'fan club' is the unorganized spontaneous mobilization of his followers (cf. Nam, 2017). Those are in effect a handful of like-minded people who became aware of Roh's political vision and efforts in the late 1990s. Starting with what was then a newly established online community, they were able to gather more sympathizers, organize themselves, and also

expand their influence into offline activities. The core of the followers who have joined the new intermediary group "Politician Fan Club" are mostly city dwellers who took part in the democratization protest but were disappointed with civil society and civil government and therefore distanced themselves from the political establishment (Nam, 2017; 2019). During the presidential election campaign in 2002, the fan club's populist voter mobilization reached a climax, as the Nosamo fan club maintained an emotional, personal and direct bond with the candidate Roh Moo-hyun. Although distancing themselves from Roh's party, Nosamo accompanied Roh's election campaign in a media-effective manner and gave him material and personal support. With the help of his passionate supporters, Roh managed to win the primary within his party and ultimately win the presidential election, thus becoming the President of the Republic of Korea (2003-2008). After winning the election, however, his fans found themselves in a role conflict between the political actor and the personal fan identities. As a result, the new president's political fans initially took a wait-and-see attitude towards political disputes during his tenure. Only after Roh's suicide (May 23, 2009) did his fans come together again as a specific organization (Nam, 2019). Since then, the fan club has been severely restricted to informal meetings between fans, who remember Roh as a private person and political visionary. In the 2017 presidential election, Nosamo once again unleashed explosive power to support Moon Jae-in, Roh's political comrade and personal friend, in his election campaign, which led him to the presidency (Nam, 2017). However, in September 2019, the "Roh Moo-hyun Foundation" took over all data from Nosamo, so the first politician fan club in South Korea was officially dissolved. Thus its history supposedly came to its closure, yet the legacy of Nosamo appears to endure in South Korean politics of nowadays.

After the politician fan club Nosamo managed to get its star politician into the presidency, many top politicians and their supporters copied this successful concept. If a person wants to run for top office, it is now taken for granted that they will set up their own fan club. Nosamo and subsequent politician fan clubs share characteristics such as strong personal ties, collective and celebratory campaign activities, use of group identification symbols (such as flags, balloons, souvenirs), etc. (Nam, 2019). In addition to the similarities, there are also differences between politician fan clubs with regard to their organizational structure, which is of central importance in the interaction between populism and clientelism. As already pointed out, Nosamo relied on an anti-elitist, charismatic politician and a spontaneous grassroots movement with no help from existing organizations (be it party or civil society). A striking contrast to Nosamo is Parksamo (the acronym for the group of "those who love Park Geun-hye"). In 2004, after the success of Nosamo, a commercial director set up a Parksamo Internet Cafe and presented himself as a follower of Park Geun-hye. The fans at the internet cafe worshipped Park's family (then-leader Park Geun-hye, her father and assassinated former President Park Chung-hee (1961-79), and her mother, who was also assassinated). In contrast to Nosamo, Parksamo relied on authoritarian protagonists under the old regime and its clientelistic mass organizations supported. In this respect, Parksamo seemed less populist and more like a broker organization between the client and the patron. Moreover, Parksamo did

not refer to the fact of hostile relations between ordinary citizens and established elites. The regionalist split was then increasingly reproduced for the presidential seizure of power, Parksamo hence perpetuating a "political machine" of patronage institutions through the name of the fan club (Kim, 2017).

Subsequently, Park Geun-hye was elected president in 2013, but was unable to serve her five-year term after she was impeached by the Constitutional Court over corruption scandals (2017). This event brought their Parksamo fan club to a turning point, as left-leaning political elites and communist activists have been blamed for the misery. The disgraced president was seen as a victim of the establishment, while the nation of Korea and the Korean people should face doom. Accordingly, the Korean national flag (possibly also the American flag) was used as a protest symbol. Only then did right-wing conservative forces, including Parksamo, adopt a clear right-wing populist position, which is characterized by spontaneous mobilization, emotions such as fear and anger, or identification as patriots (Kim, 2017). Another politician fan club is MB-Sarang (the abbreviation of "Lee Myung-bak's supporters"), which was formed in 2006 for the eponymous right-wing conservative party's presidential candidate. Lee Myung-bak owes much of his popularity to his staging as a self-made entrepreneur (Hyundai CEO, 1965-1992) and political career as mayor of Seoul (2002-2006). He differs from conventional elites in that he has achieved success alone, without the support of clientelist networks, and as CEO of a corporation has nothing in common with the usually corrupt political elites. In doing so, he prevailed in the primaries within the right-wing conservative party against Park Geun-hye, the party's most powerful politician. As a result, Lee was able to gain support from the party's regionalist networks. However, his MB-Sarang fan club quickly lost importance, since after him winning the 2007 election, clientelist networks once again took precedence in his government (Nam, 2019; Kim, 2017). Finally, another politician fan club similar to Nosamo in terms of leadership and mobilization is Ahnsamo (the abbreviation of the group of "those who love Ahn Cheol-soo:), which was formed in 2012. Like the politician fan clubs Nosamo and MB-Sarang, Ahnsamo cultivates its image by clearly distancing itself from the established (corrupt) elite. To the contrary, Ahn portrayed himself not as a professional politician, but a professor at an elite university and an IT entrepreneur. Unlike Lee Myungbak, Ahn Cheol-soo has not opted for a regionalist party, but (like Roh Moo-hyun) aspired for a new supra-regional party. In the early presidential election in 2017, Ahn was one of the forerunners, but lost to Moon Jae-in, as already noted above. Moon, a human rights lawyer and politician, is best known as a close friend of the late President Moo-hyun Roh. After Roh's death, Moon served as Chairman of the Board of the Roh Moo-hyun Foundation (2010-12). As expected, his fan club Moonfan (since 2016) has adopted Roh's fans and sympathizers on the one hand and Roh's political visions and programs on the other. His victory in the 2017 presidential election can be understood to a large extent as a déjà vu of the 2002 election campaign, hence further underscoring the vitality and endurance of political fan clubs in general and the continuity of Nosamo's appeal in particular (Nam, 2019).

In the previous paragraphs, the example of South Korea was used to explore how a populist voter movement emerges from a clientelist democratic society and how both interact (Nam, 2019). In

conclusion, it can be formulated that the interaction between populism and clientelism can be described as ambivalent (both competing and complementary). Populist movement groups (e.g., Nosamo) challenge clientelist networks to a duel. In the former, the focus is on a leader who embodies the main program and who attracts sympathizers with their charismatic charisma. In the latter, clientelist actors combine loyalty, respect and gratitude towards a leader. Populist and patronage networks compete with each other to gain top political office and to defend their interests and ideas. Likewise, a complementary form can emerge that imitates the concept of the successful fan club but is organizationally based on clientelist networks (e.g. Parksamo). Populist fan clubs often need an organizational basis in order to have a permanently stable connection with their target politicians (e.g., MB Sarang). It follows that populist and clientelist ties are mixed up, with these politician fan clubs often failing to represent an alternative to clientelism but rather complementing clientelistic exchange relationships. According to studies of voting behaviour in consecutive presidential elections (National Election Commission, 2013), personality prevails over political programs and parties: 55.7% against 23.5% and 8.4% in 2002; 39.2% versus 27.1% and 18.1% in 2007; 45.5% versus 27.4% and 17.6% in 2012. The 19th presidential election (2017) is no exception in this regard (Jeong, 2017). On closer inspection, the electoral statistics indicate a slight change in voting behaviour. Among the younger generation, voting decisions are increasingly being made on the basis of political programs. However, it is still unclear to what extent this generational difference can be interpreted as a long-term cohort effect. In the early-2000s South Korea, civil society, which, in contrast to clientelist or populist networks, relies on program-oriented strategies, became the gathering place for the diversity of intermediary organizations. Civil organizations that emerged from the democratization process can be found here together with resurgent right-wing conservative/radical organizations (Kern & Nam, 2009; Nam, 2019). This led to a polarization of civil society, which significantly blocks factual discussions and the consensus-building between activists. It has to be said that due to the widespread presence and general acceptance of politician fan clubs, personal reference in the area of political affiliations will increasingly play a central role. As well-known leaders gradually lose their popularity and relevance, the search for a (potential) star politician becomes of paramount importance. In this sense, the rise of political fan clubs in the Republic of Korea can be viewed as a reflection of the ambiguous impact of political fan clubs on the processes and patterns of political participation.

Conclusion. The case of political / politician clubs in the Republic of Korea demonstrates how the persistence of clientelistic institutions may combine with newly emergent populist movements and groups to result in a combined and deeply ambiguous outcome for the respective national political system. Finally, another question should be briefly addressed, namely whether and to what extent the concept of the interaction of populism and clientelism can also be applied to Western, liberal-democratic countries. Up until now, institutionalized representative democracy has almost exclusively been assumed to be the historical fact for the existence of right-wing populism in Western countries (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser,

2017, p. 87). Therefore, there is a debate in science and in public as to whether the existing democracy will be abolished by the populist wave or whether it will be saved from erosion (Plattner, 2010; Eatwell & Goodwin, 2018). On the other hand, recent studies focus on the persistence of clientelism in some European countries (such as Greece and Ireland; see, e.g., Afonso, Zartaloudis, & Papadopoulos, 2015). This creates a new research task, namely, to relate the development of right-wing populism in Western countries not only to representative democracy, but also to the continuing clientelism. In this sense, the case study analysis presented in this article may in effect have far-reaching consequences for studying the relationship between politics and civil society through the lens of political participation.

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