A New Era of Mass Politics?
Leadership, Populism and Information

Panel: Plenary Session III (Grand Ballroom)
Date/Time: April 26, 2012 / 08:45-10:00
Organizing Institution: The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
Speakers: Martin Fackler, The New York Times (Moderator)
                   Uzi Rabi, Moshe Dayan Center
                   Clement Henry, American University in Cairo
                   Hahm Chaibong, The Asan Institute for Policy Studies
                   David Brady, Hoover Institution
                   Jon Clifton, Gallup

Panel Short Summary

Ardie Ermac, Korea University
Seukhoon Paul Choi, Council on Foreign Relations

Martin Fackler framed the session's discussion by noting that there is a perception, and perhaps consensus, that the world is suffering from a leadership deficit. Additionally, politics, and the way it is practiced, is changing. Both a new grass roots politics and a sense of populism are appearing. This is observed in campaigns that range from Barack Obama in the United States to Roh Moo-hyun in South Korea. There are also cases of Bastille like assaults on the establishment, such as the Tea Party movement. Information and technology comprise yet another interesting change. To frame the discussion, he asked whether these various disparate elements – information, populism, and leadership – can and are linked; what is the relationship between information technology, grass roots politics, and leadership crisis?

Rabi argued that the Middle East has experienced a tumultuous change. A byproduct of leadership crisis, the region is at the threshold of a new political system and culture. Dictators – stubborn autocrats – have been toppled. In the 20th century, the "one man shows" of Mubarak, Hussein, and Gaddafi defined the Arab Middle East. However, in 2011 the barrier of fear collapsed. Though this was not the first instance that Arabs around the region protested, the difference was that they succeeded. New insights and tools must now be built to better understand the realities of the 21st century Middle East. Rabi noted that the Arab

awakening should be identified with psychological change. Future leaders will need to have an attentive ear to public demands. And the new political system will be composed of different movements, persons, and power schemes, which will make it and public discourse more convoluted.

Henry agreed that there has been a fundamental change occurring in the Middle East, but whether this constitutes a fundamental structural change is still uncertain. While the Jasmine revolution occurred in the Middle East, the word "jasmine" was censored from the Chinese internet. Even the Middle East's "awakenings" have had mixed results. A universal change however has been the way in which technology has altered media from a vertical to a horizontal nature. Whereas radio and television were hierarchical, new media platforms like Facebook, blogs, and twitter are more level. Despite regimes also using social media as a tool to sustain their power, a balance has been tipped that now enables the mass public to disperse information, mobilize, and even create transnational associations. In regard to populism, technology has rendered government to become more transparent. Ultimately, the world may now be entering a new game and era of mass politics.

Hahm Chaibong recognized that social media has allowed for the masses to be mobilized in the absence of leadership. He noted that in Korea during the anti-U.S. beef protests, people took to the streets without a demagogue, populist leader, or even seasoned student activist. This phenomenon of mass mobilization without a principal manager necessitates a new leadership model. What is interesting is that this social media effect occurs in an environment where Koreans desire both a democratic process to elect their leader, and a director who wields significant power. Thus, while technology and social media may have removed the need for a leader to facilitate mass mobilization, and have even created an information rich society in which people have as much knowledge as bureaucrats, they have not replaced the desire of people for a strong leader.

In the discourse of how these new technologies influence politics and social mobilization, David Brady highlighted the multifaceted nature of this trend by substantiating both its positive and negative aspects. On the positive side, the advent of new technologies has reduced the cost of organizing and eminently empowered individuals and groups to demand more transparency and accountability from governments. Despite these progressive aspects, the trend suffers from a few limitations. For instance, the "quality of information available in these social media and how the trend of validating sources is disappearing" is

questionable.

Building upon the discussion on leadership, Jon Clifton, the Deputy Director of the Gallup World Poll, argued that people's well-being should lie at the heart of any leader's strategy. He stated that "as leaders build their strategies […]one of the things that they should building in is a better understanding of the human condition[…]money or higher GDP does not necessarily buy you that higher well-being."