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New President on the Block, Tough Challenges Ahead: South Korea's 2002 Presidential Election

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Conclusions

The victory of Roh Moo-Hyun in South Korea's December 2002 presidential election has consolidated South Korea's democratic transition. Roh, a former human rights lawyer and an underdog during the campaign, pledges that he will challenge the old guard and encourage participatory democracy.

This election marked the end of the "three Kims" era; three power brokers who have dominated Korean politics since the 1960s. They utilized regional antagonisms, hierarchical party structures, and patronage politics involving money and corruption to run their campaigns and governments. In the 2002 elections, however, younger generations armed with the Internet changed the dynamics of the election—creating a more transparent, clean and democratic campaign atmosphere. This election signals the beginning of a new era in Korean politics.

With lingering impact of regionalism, the election was largely fought on generational and ideological grounds. The older generations tended to support traditional conservative policies, while the younger generations embraced more liberal policies offered by Roh, such as engagement with North Korea and a more autonomous relationship with the United States.

Despite his dramatic win over a powerful conservative candidate, Roh will have to adjust his ideology and reform agenda as he won with less than 50 percent of the total vote. How he embraces the other half of the electorate and handles relations with the opposition, while pursuing economic reform and growth, will be critical tests for his political leadership.

An even bigger challenge for Roh comes from North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. Although as a candidate he promised to continue engagement with the North, solving the nuclear issue peacefully may well prove to be out of Roh's reach as Pyongyang insists on talking only to Washington.

Mending frayed relations with Washington will be another tough task and, indeed, a critical factor for success in dealing with the North Korean problem. Despite his campaign rhetoric demanding more autonomy from Washington, Roh has adjusted his position toward the United States by emphasizing the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance, including the need for a U.S. military presence in South Korea.

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Roh Wins against All Odds

The December 2002 presidential election marked another important turning point in Korean politics. South Koreans chose “change” over “stability” by selecting Roh Moo-Hyun, a former human rights lawyer, as their new president. It was the second time that South Korea elected a liberal candidate from a minority party since Kim Dae Jung’s upset victory in 1997, largely a result of a split between two conservative candidates challenging the conservative old guard that had dominated Korean politics.

Conservatives in South Korea view Roh, a self-made man with no college degree who grew up in a poor peasant family, as a radical. In the 1980s, he supported South Korea’s labor movement and argued for U.S. troop withdrawal. Roh describes himself as a center-left liberal and openly challenges the old establishment dominated by the conservative elite class. During his campaign, he promised to revise the National Security Law, a special anti-North Korea law often used to quell domestic dissidents, and to push forward economic reform by mainly targeting big businesses. Although Roh was a candidate from the governing Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), he was regarded as an underdog in this presidential race not only because the MDP has been a minority party, but also because Roh himself did not get much recognition from his party as a relatively new contender during the party primary.

Roh’s early success came from his drive to adopt the first ever U.S.-style primary in his party, in which he scored a dramatic upset win. The sudden rise of Roh’s popularity forced the opposition party to follow suit, making this election more democratic. Roh burst upon the national political scene so quickly that the press dubbed the phenomenon as the “Roh poong,” or “the Roh tempest.” However, Roh’s candidacy flagged over the summer as a corruption scandal involving President Kim’s two sons came under investigation and political attack by his political opponent.

The majority opposition Grand National Party (GNP) candidate, Lee Hoi Chang, a conservative former Supreme Court justice, enjoyed a comfortable lead over Roh in most national polls. Offering a clear choice between his conservative views and Roh’s liberal views on various issues, Lee argued that Roh was a successor to the corrupt Kim Dae Jung government and his failed sunshine policy of rewarding bad faith from North Korea. Unlike Roh’s commitment to engagement with the north, Lee promised to take a tough and uncompromising position. The landslide victory of the GNP in the June 2002 by-election appeared to indicate that Lee’s conservative views were popular and would lead him to a sure win in the December presidential election. Indeed, the MDP nearly forced Roh out of the race on the grounds that he was not electable.

However, Roh’s drive for new political reform caught the mind of younger and progressive voters and ultimately Lee suffered a painful election loss. Roh was seen as an engine of change, younger and less corrupt than previous politicians. In the early 1990s, determined to challenge regional antagonism and patronage politics, Roh refused to join his mentor, Kim Young Sam, who later became president after a political compromise with the conservative ruling party under military rule. Instead, Roh joined Kim Dae Jung, Kim Young-Sam’s archrival, and ran for re-election as a member of the liberal party in his home district of Busan, the heartland of Korean conservatism and a Kim Young Sam stronghold. It was political suicide to run against regionalism in defiance of political giant Kim Young Sam. Roh lost three consecutive elections, but his stubbornness created a public impression that he stands up for what he believes in, pursues his ideals and does not give up.

Portraying himself as an outsider, Roh managed to depict Lee as a representative of politics as usual. He pledged to end regional rivalries, political corruption, and the “imperial” presidency that have characterized Korean politics for decades.

It turned out that South Korean voters were swayed by Roh’s promises to reduce cronyism and bring in fresh faces. A strategic alliance with Chung Mong-Joon, a popular heir to the Hyundai family who joined the presidential race after the successful hosting of May 2002 World Cup Soccer Tournament, united young and liberal voters as the campaign raced into the final round. Despite a shocking blow from Chung with his infamous last-minute withdrawal of support, Roh pulled out a surprising, but narrow victory based on the young voters’ support for change and reform.

The End of Old Politics?

It has been widely noted that this election marked the end of the “three Kims” era and the beginning of new politics. Kim Dae Jung, Kim Young Sam, and Kim Jong Pil were the power brokers of Korean politics since the 1960s. Acting like a political feudal lord, each Kim exercised absolute authority over his party, which was largely based in his home region. The political rivalry among them created strong regional antagonisms and the three political giants dominated Korea’s political scene during Korea’s transition from dictatorship to democracy in the nineties. Although Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung later became democratically elected presidents after their political struggle against the military government, the chronic problems of regional antagonism, hierarchical party politics, presidential concentration of power, corruption, and scandals involving close associates and family members thwarted South Korea’s progress toward a democracy.

However, the influence of these three Kims was hardly visible in the 2002 election. This was the first election in 31 years in which none of the three Kims competed for the presidency. In this election, neither party had a candidate from its home region. Roh was from the city of Busan, an arch rival city of the MDP stronghold, Kwangju. The familiar scene of mass rallies organized by campaign brokers utilizing huge campaign funds was replaced by a live broadcast of the first-ever party primary participated in by a voluntary group of citizens and government-funded TV debates. It seems the three Kims have passed from the political scene with their old political practices.

Apart from change amongst the politicians, the electorate has changed, too. Some defined this election as a battle of the generations. A sharp line divided the electorate at age 45. Those older than 45 heavily favored Lee, sharing his hard line view on North Korea and other conservative policies, such as a pro-American stance and pro-business economics. Roh was backed by the younger generations, who were attracted by his policy of engaging North Korea and the promise of autonomous or equal relations with the United States.

South Korea is undergoing simultaneous moves toward globalization of its economy and society, and a more open and proud nationalism. South Korea’s younger generation tends to be assertive and self-confident, having grown up during unprecedented economic prosperity. This younger generation does not have a memory of the Korean War, and therefore does not share the same animosity toward North Korea and favorable view of the United States as their parents do. Young Koreans therefore question the purpose of the U.S.-ROK alliance. In the past few years, hundreds of “civic organizations” have formed, mostly populated by younger Koreans who voice diverse opinions on social, economic, and political issues and challenge the conservative thinking of the older generation.

In this election, the Internet had a revolutionary impact. For example, an Internet-based fan club called “Nosamo,” with 70,000 members, successfully campaigned for Roh’s election. Nosamo is self-funded by membership fees and nearly half of its 70,000 members are in their thirties. It boasts a democratic decision-making process through online discussions. Roh, who is known for his computer expertise, focused his campaign strategy on decentralized and horizontal communication using the Internet. His web site attracted a large number of young Internet users who were mostly bold and nationalistic in expressing their views. Such traits were first exhibited by the supporters of the South Korean Red Devil soccer team during the World Cup, and later led to candlelight vigils for two schoolgirls who had been killed in an accident involving a U.S. military vehicle.

This approach represents a drastic departure from the old political practice of patronage with the local political establishment run by a central leadership and money from the top of the party hierarchy. Chung’s last-minute decision to withdraw support for Roh only solidified Roh supporters, who waged a frantic online drive to urge young and reform-minded voters to come out and vote for Roh even at the last minute. The online campaign using the Internet proved to be very efficient way of communicating with voters. Less money was spent, making the election less corrupt, more open, and more democratic than ever before. President Roh pledged that his government would encourage more participatory democracy in its decision-making process by using the Internet to actively solicit public opinion.

Domestic Challenges Ahead

Despite support for reform and democracy in Korea, the new Roh government faces serious challenges on both the domestic and international fronts. Domestically, the first issue is regionalism. Roh still faces the lingering influence of “three Kim” politics—voting along regional lines. Although Roh campaigned hard for overcoming regional feuds in Korean politics, the voting results showed clear regionalist patterns as Roh swept the western peninsula while Lee did so in the eastern region. In particular, Roh’s narrow victory was largely possible because he won more than 90 percent of the vote in the Honam province, a traditional home base of his MDP party. This suggests his leadership is based on traditional regional dividing lines, and he faces a tough challenge in uniting the country.

The second issue is a serious ideological division among the domestic constituency. Roh also faces stiff resistance from a large portion of the domestic constituency against his reform agenda. Roh’s narrow victory—winning 48.9 percent of the popular vote compared to 46.6 percent for Lee, with less than 80 percent voter turnout—indicates that more than half of the electorate is still unsure about his leadership and policies. Along with a generational and regional divide, there is still an ideological divide. This election was defined by the media as a battle of the political left and right, who were keenly divided on issues such as the direction of economic reform, North Korea policy, and the U.S.-ROK alliance. Despite the generational change, anti-reform conservatives still occupy important positions in society and wield considerable economic power. Roh will have to accommodate these conservatives, which means compromising his campaign promises and policies. This might in turn alienate some of his most ardent liberal and younger supporters.

Finally, despite the early success of overcoming the 1997 financial crisis, economic reform is yet to be completed in South Korea. Many believe the country’s economic future depends on critical decisions to be made by the new government. The Kim Dae Jung government sought aggressive reform in the banking system and forced Korea’s powerful family-owned conglomerates, the chaebols, to tackle loss-making businesses and to operate in a more transparent, less corrupt way. Roh appears to be determined to accelerate these policies while promising to reduce gov-

ernment regulations to create a more business-friendly environment. Some observers, however, have expressed concern that Roh’s links to South Korea’s militant labor unions could prevent him from reforming the country’s inflexible labor market, another major obstacle to corporate efficiency. Although Roh has promised to use his good relations with workers to encourage change, finding a formula for achieving sustained economic growth while pursuing needed economic reform will prove a tough task for the new administration.

Bigger Challenges from the North

The success of Roh’s balancing act between reform and stability on the domestic economic and political front will be heavily influenced by two outside factors that are closely connected, yet maybe beyond Roh’s control: North Korea’s nuclear ambition and South Korea’s tumultuous relations with the United States. At its final stage, the election was largely shaped by North Korea’s newly discovered nuclear program in October and rising anti-American sentiment among the public.

Voters were faced with a clear choice between Roh’s policy of continuing engagement with North Korea and Lee’s hard line policy—favored by the United States—of forcing Pyongyang to change its behavior and to dismantle its suspected nuclear program. The conventional wisdom was that North Korea’s nuclear threat would favor the conservative position taken by Lee, but more people, especially those in their twenties and thirties, preferred Roh’s more peaceful approach. Indeed, since the nuclear revelation, inter-Korean relations have been on the rise, as Pyongyang appeared to be more receptive to various proposals from Seoul. They opened for the first time a land route through the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) for the Diamond Mountain tour, and agreed on building a family reunion site on the DMZ and opening a large industrial park in Kaesong, 30 miles north of the DMZ.

However, solving the nuclear issue will be no easy task. In the past, North Korea proved a difficult negotiator and responded to South Korea’s sunshine policy with a variety of armed provocations. In particular, Pyongyang made it clear that it would not listen to South Korea when it comes to the matter of security. Despite Roh’s suggestion that he wants to take a leading role in resolving the issue as a “neutral” mediator between Pyongyang and Washington, a surprising statement to his ally in Washington, North Korea maintains that it will discuss outstanding nuclear and other security issues only with the United States. In April 2003, North Korea agreed to attend multilateral talks in Beijing with the United States and China. However, South Korea was excluded from the talks on Pyongyang’s demand, which created angry criticism among the South Korean public about the Roh administration’s North Korea policy.

There is talk in Seoul that President Roh’s policy toward the North may have to be retooled. In December 2002, Roh warned that North Korea’s defiant attitude could make it difficult for him to continue his predecessor’s policy of seeking reconciliation with Pyongyang. “Whatever North Korea’s rationale is in taking such actions, they are not beneficial to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia, nor are they helpful for its own safety and prosperity,” Roh said in a statement. Roh warned again in his inauguration in February 2003 that Pyongyang should choose between nuclear weapons and economic prosperity.

However, Pyongyang responded to Roh’s call by further provocation, including a missile test and reactivation of one of its nuclear reactors at Yongbyon. The dramatic revelation of a \$186 million cash payment made to North Korea just before Kim Dae Jung’s historic trip to Pyongyang in June 2000 created further mistrust among the public over the notion of engagement. Roh renamed his engagement effort the “peace and prosperity” policy, a less forgiving phrase than the “sunshine” policy. Many doubt that Roh has leverage to persuade Kim Jong Il to give up his

nuclear weapons, let alone take a leading role between Pyongyang and Washington. North Korea policy will be the new president's most important and most difficult job.

The North Korea imbroglio involves another player—the United States—and has put Roh in a difficult position as he tries to balance the nationalistic demands of the young generation that voted him in and the more realist grumbling of the world's most powerful power and South Korea's ally. Roh, who pledged not to kowtow to Washington, was elected at a time of unprecedented anti-American sentiment in South Korea. Tens of thousands of people took to the streets during the last days of the campaign protesting against America after the acquittal in a court martial of the two American soldiers involved in the accidental deaths of two schoolgirls. Many expected that Roh's election would lead to a difficult period in relations between the two longtime allies.

Roh's challenge now is to reconcile the yearning of South Korea's younger generations for more autonomy from the United States and the reality of South Korea's continuing reliance on American protection against North Korea's military threat amidst ongoing nuclear confrontation between Pyongyang and Washington. In his inauguration, Roh told his people that South Korea must create a "more reciprocal and equal relationship" with the United States. Roh asserted that the two Koreas "are the two main actors in inter-Korean relations," and strongly opposed any possible use of military force to resolve North Korea's nuclear development. The remarks seemed to contrast with the position taken by the Bush administration, which has sought to turn up multilateral pressure to force Pyongyang to halt its nuclear weapons program, and has not ruled out a military option.

Nevertheless, Roh cannot but accept the importance of the U.S. role in providing vital security to South Korea and resolving Pyongyang's nuclear problem. Even during his campaign, he edged toward the center, repeatedly stating that his previous opposition to American bases was wrong and that he valued the alliance with the United States. Since he took office, Roh has made efforts to smooth over relations with Washington. His government acted swiftly to dissuade various anti-American protests led by civic groups. South Korea's decision to publicly support the U.S. war on Iraq sent a clear sign of good will to Washington. Later, Roh said that his decision to send Korean troops to Iraq was based on a strategic and realistic judgment of what would best ensure peace on the peninsula. He said that confidence in the Korea-U.S. relationship needed to be solidified so it can serve as a foundation for solving the nuclear crisis on the peninsula and improving relations between North Korea and the United States.

Implications for the United States

Roh faces tough challenges in leading the country in maybe one of the most uncertain times in Korea's modern history. On the

domestic front, his party is still in the minority and Roh does not have a strong grip on his own party. The opposition party still dominates the legislature and is willing to put up a fight against the new president on any issue. Meanwhile, Roh's compromising attitude could result in a revolt from his own supporters. The two controversial decisions to accept a special investigation bill on the cash payment to North Korea and to support the U.S. war on Iraq created angry reactions from his party and the liberals who voted him to office.

Roh faces a bigger challenge in resolving North Korea's nuclear confrontation with the United States. Despite his rhetoric, many doubt that he has a concrete roadmap for taking a leading role in solving the problem peacefully. In any case, Pyongyang's insistence on bilateral negotiations with Washington does not leave much room for Seoul to maneuver between the two. Furthermore, escalating Pyongyang's brinkmanship is wreaking havoc on South Korea's economy as worries of a possible crisis on the peninsula cause a sharp decline in the already weakened stock market. Washington's announcement of a plan to restructure its troop posture in South Korea only worsened the situation, creating greater anxiety among the public about future relations with the United States.

Indeed, after his dramatic victory, Roh may find himself in a tough position; caught between a sharply divided domestic constituency and a looming crisis brought on by North Korea's nuclear brinkmanship. So far, Roh has shown a strong will in pushing forward domestic political and economic reform by appointing young and reform-minded members to his cabinet. Yet, any serious fallout in the handling of North Korea's nuclear issue could jeopardize the whole domestic reform effort. Solving North Korea's nuclear issue will require close cooperation with the United States. President Roh seems to have a better understanding of the importance of good relations with Washington than candidate Roh. In addition to his support for the war in Iraq, his government suggested talks between Washington and Pyongyang within a multilateral framework, another effort to accommodate the U.S. position.

The victory of Roh reflects changing demographics in South Korean society, whose views on various issues may, at times, differ from those of the United States. Roh's victory was another showcase for South Korea's progress toward liberal democracy with an American flavor. South Korea and the United States must effectively coordinate their respective approaches in dealing with North Korea's nuclear ambitions. The future of the alliance will depend on the success of these efforts. The summit in May 2003 between President Bush and President Roh was a positive step forward for the two countries to promote mutual understanding and mend frayed relations. The two allies should continue their effort to recognize common interests based on shared fundamental values, and to prepare for a better future for the two longtime partners.



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