

Advancing Democracy for South Korea: Beyond Electoral Politics and Presidential Impeachment*

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South Korea is a trailblazer on the path toward liberal democracy in Asia. Following the 1987 democratic "opening" and transition, the Republic of Korea (ROK) has moved on toward democratic consolidation with a series of drastic reform measures. It moved on to "deepening" democracy and ambitious institution building. As a result, Korea is today recognized internationally as both a thriving democracy and a vibrant capitalist economy. Freedom House Country Ratings continue to place South Korea in the ranking of a liberal democracy, with an average score of 2.0. The ratings for 2005 gave South Korea an average of 1.5 for the two categories of "political rights" and "civil liberties" on a "freedom scale" of 1 to 7, where 1 represents the highest degree of freedom and 7 the lowest.¹ In 2004, South Korea emerged as the 10th largest economy in the world, with a GDP of US\$667.4 billion and a per capita GNP of US\$16,900.

Democratization has led Korea to begin "breaking down hierarchies, empowering individuals, and transforming societies well beyond politics."² Full democratization, however, is a long-term objective for Korea. What we can evaluate today is the extent to which any administration of Korea's Sixth Republic has formulated policy goals and succeeded in performing established tasks. The two years of the Roh Moo-hyun Administration since its inauguration on February 25, 2003, give sufficient time to do a preliminary stock-taking of what has been done and what remains to be accomplished.

To give more of a focus to the evaluation and analysis of Korean democracy under the Roh Moo-hyun Administration today, the discussion will proceed to address (1) the historical context of the current problems and promises; (2) the political dynamics and policy process; (3) comparative and theoretical implications; and, (4) future prospects.

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The Promise and Problems of the Roh Moo-hyun Administration

Promoting Democracy via 'Participatory Government'

Since the launching of the Roh Moo-hyun Administration, South Korea has prided itself on entering the new "age of substantive democratization, having undergone the stages of national founding, industrialization and procedural democratization." In this new era "the people stand at the center of power" and, according to the Chong Wa Dae Home Page, the "philosophy of the Participatory Government" will guide the Roh Administration, "where principles prevail and the people's sovereignty is substantiated."

The Roh Government promised to be a "rational, reform-minded government" that was devoted to building "a just and efficient" society, according to the website. It was to be a "government of national integration" that sought to resolve "the structural conflicts of the nation" and establish an "open government" that would "engage in horizontal, two-way communication with the people," and usher in a "government of hope" that would "instill dreams and courage in all citizens." The website identified a specific set of three goals: democracy with the people, a society of "balanced development," and an era of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia.³

During a January 2004 New Year's news conference, President Roh Moo-hyun apologized for disappointing his country with a political funding scandal involving his close aides.⁴ Under the Constitution the sitting president is exempt from being charged with criminal offences other than grave crimes threatening national security. He also insisted that the economy was showing signs of a turnaround, and he called on labor unions to refrain from demanding excessive wage increases.⁵

One year later, President Roh Moo-hyun opened his New Year's news conference by stating that "there was a diversity of both good and bad events last year, and I spent most of it thinking about what to do about the economy" with a hope that "the economy will perform better this year." After enumerating the specific ways of undertaking these goals, like addressing the widening "gap existing between different types of industries, enterprises and workers," the president closed his prepared remarks with an upbeat statement on "an advanced Korea (that) will be feasible when not only the economy but also our consciousness, social community and overall culture are advanced."⁶

Presidential Impeachment Politics

On March 12, 2004, South Korea’s embattled President Roh Moo-hyun was subjected to an unprecedented impeachment motion by the opposition-dominated National Assembly. This political crisis in South Korea, on the eve of the forthcoming parliamentary election in April, led to the polarization of public opinion between anti-Roh conservatives and pro-reform liberal forces within civil society.

The crisis erupted when the secondary opposition Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) in the National Assembly moved first, joined by the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP), to impeach the sitting president. This measure was not well received by the media and civil society groups; they argued that an outgoing parliament should not have acted to impeach a president who had been elected by the direct and popular vote.

This latest saga of presidential impeachment indicates more than a failure of political leadership, however. It is a reflection of deeper structural problems in Korea’s new democracy. It offers a dramatic demonstration of the problems of divided government. A government with both a popularly elected president and a popularly elected parliament requires close cooperation between the two branches of government in order to prevent a stalemate in conducting the business of government. Roh’s penchant for taking a “principled stance” on the political reform agenda, reinforced by his high-risk style of confrontational politics instead of dispute settlement through give-and-take, has also contributed to the latest political impasse between the executive and legislative branches. Nevertheless, so long as the competing interests work within the institutional framework, democracy will be able to weather this type of crisis and potentially emerge even stronger in South Korea.

During the weeks following the impeachment decision, various polls indicated support of Roh by an overwhelming three-to-one ratio. According to election laws, the official campaign for parliamentary elections is allowed to run for only two weeks prior to the election date. Prime Minister Goh Kun, who became acting President, announced that all civil servants would maintain strict neutrality and impartiality during the forthcoming election. This was somewhat in contrast to the public stance of President Roh, who argued that realignment of political forces was necessary in order to carry out his electoral promises and the mandate he had received for reforming political institutions. This is why the Uri (Open and Participatory) Party that he had supported needed to win big in the 17th National Assembly Election.

What Happened, and Why?

Following the unprecedented impeachment of the sitting President by the opposition dominated National Assembly on March 12, 2004, political upheaval and uncertainty ensued in South Korea. This political uncertainty was to continue until the Constitutional Court decided, within 180 days, whether to uphold the parliament’s impeachment vote or to restore President Roh, who was down but not out of power. The lopsided legislative vote did not reflect the ballots of 49 members of the pro-Roh Uri Party, who were evicted from the chamber when they physically occupied the podium to block passage of the bill.

The impeachment issue was met by a public outcry, as shown by a candlelight vigil protest by Roh supporters, and it galvanized the electorate during the subsequent National Assembly election on April 15. This election was seen as a referendum on President Roh, whose popularity had sunk from the high of 80 percent to as low as 30 percent during the first year of his administration. More significantly, it reflected the determination of grass roots populists to withstand orchestrated attacks by political conservatives. The legislative dominance of the Uri Party, established through its dramatic electoral victory, should help to restore political stability for the remainder of Roh’s five year term in office. The electoral returns, as shown at the bottom of Table 1, indicate the historical South Korea’s Sixth Republic.

Table 1
Parliamentary Electoral Outcome and Party Strength in the ROH Sixth Republic (2000 and 2004)

General Elections	Parliamentary Seats Captured		Party/name/leader
	The ruling party	Opposition Party	
16 th National Assembly Election (4/2000)			
	115	133	GNP/Lee Hoi-chang
			MDP/Kim Dae-jung
		17	ULD/Kim Jong-pil
		8	Independents/Others
		Total Seats	273
17 th National Assembly Election (4/2004)			
	152		Uri Party/ Chung Dong-Yong
		121	GNP/Park Guen-hye
		10	DLP/ Kwon Young-ghil
		9	MDP/FCHoo Mi-ae
		4	ULD/Kim Jong-pil

		3	<i>Independents/Others</i>
Total Seats		299*	

***With the adoption of a “one person, two votes system” election law, the number of total seats was increased to 299, of which 243 are representatives of the single-member electoral districts and the remaining 56 are at-large proportional representation members.**

The 17th National Assembly election was remarkable because, unlike some other preceding general elections, there was no major contest over wide-ranging campaign issues. Candidates and political parties were held hostage by one single agenda item—the impeachment of President Roh by an outgoing National Assembly. The opposition parties were all hamstrung and handicapped in their campaigns by a voter backlash against impeachment that delivered a bonanza of votes to Uri Party candidates. The Roh administration’s crucial policy failures, such as the lowest economic growth rate in years, ineptness of presidential leadership, and a campaign funds scandal involving presidential aides, did not appear to have affected voters who supported the Uri Party that Roh had endorsed.

In a last-minute attempt to galvanize voter support, the main opposition GNP chose as its new leader Rep. Park Geun-hye, the late president Park Chung-Hee’s daughter. She exhibited broad appeal to conservative voters, especially in the Southeastern region. The second opposition MDP likewise chose as its new campaign leader, Rep. Choo Mi-ae, a female legislator who would consolidate traditional voter support in the Southwestern region. GNP Chairwoman Park suggested a more flexible and future-oriented North Korea policy as well as institutionalizing inter-Korean relations, a clear reversal of the traditional GNP policy stance.

Charges of “biased” election-related coverage by the TV media, especially the state-owned Korea Broadcasting Service, emerged during the weeks of heated campaigning. MBC showed, tastelessly, an episode highlighting Park Chung-Hee’s assassination that depicted his assassin, Kim Jae-kyu, as furthering the cause of restoring democracy. Daily newspapers struggled to retain objectivity and impartiality in election coverage under the watchful eyes of the National Election Commission.

Election campaigns began turning nastier with the use of negative TV ads. A governing Uri Party’s TV ad, for instance, chose to highlight GNP Rep. Park Geun-hye wearing a broad smile in the National Assembly, allegedly when the motion to impeach the president was being declared passed; this was to reinforce the voters’ already negative feeling toward impeachment.

As a post-Confucian society, South Korea is sensitive to traditional values and cultural norms involving gender and age issues. The fact that the two opposition parties, the GNP and MDP, chose, as their leaders, females and youthful legislators, was in itself a new path-breaking development. The new MDP leader was at once a staunch supporter of Roh Moo-hyun, and a critic of Roh’s subsequent switch-over of party loyalty and affiliation.

When Uri Party Chairman Chung Dong-young misspoke during an election rally, saying that “the older voters in their 60-70s might as well stay home” rather than (wasting their time) voting, this gaff led to an emotional protest by senior citizens. Three days before the election Rep. Chung Dong-young stepped down as the Uri Party’s campaign chairman and also gave up his candidacy for an at-large parliamentary seat. Following the Uri Party’s landslide victory, however, Chung reemerged as its party chairman. An expectation was that he would probably return to the National Assembly by running for one of the by-elections soon to be held within the next six to twelve months.⁷ Not surprisingly, as the campaign was picking up steam, a larger voter turnout was predicted by pollsters, especially by older citizen voters.

According to a telephone survey of 1,017 adults nationwide, conducted by the *Choson Ilbo* and *Korea Gallup* on April 10, 80.2 percent replied that they would “certainly vote” in the upcoming election. This was up from 74.5 percent in a survey ten days earlier on March 30. Particularly dramatic was the proportion of citizens over the age of 50 (89.6 percent) who indicated that they would exercise their right to vote. In contrast, 63.4 percent of people in their twenties, 78.3 percent in their thirties, and 86.6 percent in their forties reported that they would be voting.

The electorate was also very well informed. Of those surveyed, 83 percent said that they were aware of the new “one person, two votes system,” which was being introduced for the first time in a general election. Under the “one person, two votes system,” 31.3 percent replied that the candidate and party they intended to vote for would be different. This was an increase from the 21.3 percent revealed by a Gallup survey taken just ten days earlier.

However, almost half of the voters were undecided five days before the election date—23.7 percent did not reveal the candidate they would support, and 24.9 percent answered that they might change their minds. It suggested that the Korean voters were fully aware of the importance that the election would play in nurturing democratic institutions and in determining their political destiny for the future.⁸

Two additional minor parties competed for National Assembly seats: one was class-based and the other a regionally-oriented political party. Democratic Labor Party (DLP) Election Committee Chairman Cheon Young-se announced the party's so-called "Three Revolutions in Welfare" platform, calling for free education, free healthcare, and public housing. The United Liberal Democrats (ULD), with Kim Jong-pil as its president, also stumped in South Chungcheong Province, promising special benefits for his home districts. He reminded the voters that despite laws already passed by the National Assembly, his party would continue its efforts to insure that the capital would be moved away from Seoul to central South Korea.

Of the 35.6 million eligible voters over the age of 20, the voter turnout registered 21.3 million people, or 59.2 percent; this was above average and higher than the 57.2 voter turnout percentage in the 16th National Assembly election in 2000. Four years earlier, in 1996, the voter turnout was 63.9 percent. In 2004 a total of 1,175 candidates from 14 separate parties and groups competed for 243 single-member district seats, an average of 4.8 per each electoral district.

Anti-Climax of Impeachment and Roh's Vindication

On May 14, 2004, the Constitutional Court rejected the parliament's impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun. The Korean Constitution, in Article 65, stipulates that in order to impeach a president, the president should be guilty of severe violations related to "the performance of official duties." The violations as charged "are hardly perceived as severe enough to discharge the president," the court president Yun Young-chul said when he read the verdict in a nationally-televised session. In making this announcement, Yun refused to reveal how the nine justices voted, thereby hinting that there was a split. Yun refused to reveal who and how many were for or against the verdict, by stating that not releasing the minority opinion would be entirely proper and by citing article 36, clause 3, of the Constitutional Court law.⁹

Among the three main reasons for impeachment charges of electoral law violations, incompetence and corruption-- the court rejected two. The court ruled that Roh had, indeed, violated the election law requiring public officials to stay neutral, when he remarked to reporters in February that he was in support of Uri Party candidates in the forthcoming general election. His remarks drew a warning from the National Election Commission, but those violations did not qualify as "grave violations of duty" requiring impeachment. The second charge of Roh's economic mismanagement could never be considered grounds for impeachment in the court's opinion. On the

third charge, corruption among presidential aides, the court ruled that this could have occurred before Roh assumed office and that Roh's involvement was not clearly established.

Given this ruling, President Roh, who was reinstated, owed the nation both an apology for breaching the election law and a pledge to uphold the rule of law. The court's ruling offered the president an opportunity to free himself from the pursuit of partisan interests to focus on serving the entire nation with the support of the newly constituted National Assembly. The Korean people deserve that high level of statesmanship from their elected leaders.

Political Dynamics and Policy Processes:

The First Year of the Roh government

Electoral democracy and party politics throughout 2003-04 have dictated the contour of the political landscape. The practical politics of the day-to-day operation of democratic institutions in South Korea need to be spelled out.

The first year of the new democracy under Roh was judged to be not as successful or smooth as his predecessors, either for Kim Young-sam (1993-1998) or Kim Dae-jung (1998-2003). On September 20, 2003, President Roh Moo-hyun dropped a bombshell by announcing that he would soon quit the ruling MDP.¹⁰ Roh's retaining of his position as chief executive does not depend on the majority support in the National Assembly. The party split meant that the ruling party was now fractionalized into two rival groups: those loyal to Roh and others loyal to the party's founder, former President Kim Dae-jung. This new move by Roh was interpreted as indicating a resolve to launch a new political party to choose his own lawmakers for the scheduled April 2004 National Assembly elections.

The new splinter party (initially called the United New Party for Participatory Citizens) controlled only 43 seats in the 273-seat National Assembly, increasing its membership to 47 seats as of December 1, 2003, compared with 149 belonging to the main opposition GNP, 60 to the MDP, and 17 of the remaining independents including former United Liberal Democrats (ULD). Roh's presidency did not depend on parliament, but his ability to rule could be hampered by parliamentary delays.

A crisis of confidence deepened when Roh Moo-hyun called for a national referendum around December 15 to see if he should continue to rule or would step down if he lost public support. "I reached a situation in which I cannot conduct the presidency," Roh said in a televised speech. "It is more important to establish a political

culture of taking responsibility and lead national politics in the right direction than to complete my five-year term".¹¹

The vote of confidence never materialized, however, because his critics interpreted this bombshell proposal as a calculated ploy to elicit voters' sympathy away from scandals involving his close aides and a hostile parliament. Furthermore, the Constitutional Court, by a vote of 5 to 4, ruled against the legality of the proposed national referendum. In the court's opinion, the issues at stake did not constitute a grave matter of economic emergency or national security that would necessitate the calling of a national referendum.¹²

The opposition dominated parliament failed to enact the necessary legislation to enable the holding of a referendum as proposed by Roh. In the meantime Roh's long-time aide for twenty-years was arrested and accused of receiving \$956,000 in bribes from the SK Group, a scandal-plagued South Korean conglomerate. Two of his close aides were also subjected to a government investigation. The National Assembly instead voted to appoint an independent investigator to oversee an investigation focusing on Roh's former top aides. As President Roh vetoed this bill, saying that it was premature to appoint an independent counsel given a probe currently underway, a legislative boycott by the opposition GNP paralyzed the National Assembly for eight days.

The probe into President Roh's campaign funds also continued as prosecutors indicted eight of his aides for suspicion of illegal fundraising of up to \$5 million. Roh's veto of a slush fund probe was overruled by the Assembly on December 4, 2003, in an overwhelming vote. Of 266 lawmakers who voted, 209 endorsed the motion to overturn Roh's veto, while 54 disagreed. One abstained, and two were declared invalid. The law requires a two-thirds majority to override any presidential veto, and Roh could not again veto the bill. This was the first time in 49 years that the National Assembly had rejected a presidential veto, and this move set the stage for a further showdown between the two branches of government. The president's office expressed its "regret" but indicated that the government would respect the assembly's decision.¹³

Before December 9, when the legislative session ended, the National Assembly was able to vote on a total of 1,205 bills, including the following year's budget. A special legislative session was called to dispose of these bills, including appropriations and the sending of 3,000 combat troops to Iraq.¹⁴ In office for only eight months Roh's approval ratings plummeted to 25.6 percent from 80 percent right after he had taken office. The Roh administration was open to attacks by the press and the opposition over economic recession, scandals involving close

aides, and the mishandling of the North Korean nuclear issue and relations with the United States. On December 17, 2003, Seoul's Defense Minister announced that South Korea would send 3,000 troops to Iraq in early 2004, in addition to the 675 medical and engineering personnel already dispatched in 2003.

Roh's bid for electoral victory in April 2004 general election was to depend largely on the health of the economy and the foreign and domestic policy agenda. Direct foreign investment in the Korean economy had been on the decline for the preceding four years. The reported cases of foreign investment fell from 4,140 in 2000 to 3,340 in 2001, 2,402 in 2002, and 1,215 for the first six months of 2003. As a result, foreign investment in Korea dropped from \$15.22 billion in 2000 to \$11.29 billion in 2001, \$9.1 billion in 2002, and \$2.66 billion in the first half of 2003.¹⁵

The ROK National Assembly voted the passage of a controversial five-day workweek bill on August 31, in clear defiance of labor groups. The newly enacted labor law, which was passed 141-57 with 32 abstentions, put to an end a three-year debate between labor and management and reduced working hours from forty-four to forty hours per week by abolishing half-days on Saturday. Under the new law, both private- and public-sector companies with more than 1,000 employees will have to adopt the five-day workweek system beginning on July 1, 2004, and those with 300 employees or more, one year later on July 1, 2005.¹⁶

In January 2004 Roh Moo-hyun apologized during a New Year's press conference for disappointing his country because of the political funding scandal involving his close aides. He also insisted that the economy was showing signs of a turnaround while calling on labor unions to refrain from demanding excessive wage increases. A few days later Roh's foreign minister was replaced in the midst of Seoul's delicate diplomatic dealings and balancing act over the pending six-party Beijing talks on North Korea's nuclear standoff.¹⁷ Roh's apology amounted to an admission to the corruption charges, according to some critics. Since Roh repeatedly had stated that he was willing to step down over his aides' misdeeds, this admission made the Roh government politically weak and insecure. The country's domestic politics by the end of Roh's first year in office became volatile and uncertain on the eve of the new campaign season to begin for the seventeenth National Assembly election in April 2004.¹⁸

The Second Year of President Roh Moo-hyun's government

Political upheaval and uncertainty immediately followed the unprecedented impeachment of the sitting President Roh Moo-hyun by

the opposition-dominated National Assembly on March 12, 2004. The impeachment move, as already noted at the onset, was met by a public outcry, as shown in candlelight vigil protests by Roh supporters, and it galvanized the electorate during the subsequent National Assembly election on April 15. The political uncertainty was lifted when the Constitutional Court, on May 14, gave its verdict by rejecting the parliamentary impeachment act and restoring Roh Moo-hyun to his office. The second year of the Roh administration began with his political comeback.

The Seventeenth National Assembly election, which was seen initially as a referendum on Roh's Administration, led to the legislative victory of the Uri Party favored by Roh himself. The Uri Party dominance (capturing 152 seats in the 299-seat National Assembly) was interpreted as a victory of the progressive liberal forces over the conservative forces that had been entrenched in the political landscape of South Korea's Sixth Republic. It also helped to enhance the political possibility of stability for the remainder of Roh's five-year term in office.

The Uri Party attained a decisive victory in the general election, by capturing 152 seats in the 299-seated National Assembly, followed by 121 seats by the GNP and a meager nine seats by the MDP. This was far better than pollsters had predicted on the eve of the Presidential impeachment voting on March 12. Only three other groups, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) (ten seats), the United Liberal Democrats (ULD) (four seats), and Independents/Others (three seats) were successful in placing candidates in office. The DLP emerged as the third largest voting bloc within the parliament, ahead of both the MDP and the ULD, by virtue of its capturing enough nationwide support to win eight at-large delegates, even if it was successful in winning only two electoral districts. The DLP chairman, Kwon Young-ghil, was elected this time from an industrial district of Changwon City instead of the Ulsan City district as had been the case four years earlier.¹⁹

Table 1 above shows the parliamentary electoral outcome and party strength in the ROK Sixth Republic before and after the April 15, 2004 National Assembly election. The electoral victory of the Uri Party had helped an embattled President Roh Moo-hyun, who was humiliated by an opposition-dominated National Assembly, to vindicate himself. Roh's case before the Constitutional Court was also judged to be strengthened so as to win back his presidency.

Neither of the opposition parties, the GNP nor the MDP, was successful in returning as the majority party in parliament. The GNP had 137 and the MDP 61 seats in the outgoing legislature, the Uri Party

only 49 seats. The rise of the Uri Party as the majority party in the new National Assembly has meant that a change in the status-quo will be accelerated in South Korea's political landscape--a movement away from the old politics toward the new politics, thereby overcoming "regionalism and bossism" in party politics. The era of the "Three Kims" in Korean politics was already declared officially over with the victory of Roh Moo-hyun in the December 2002 Presidential Election.

As for the impeachment proceedings, opinions were divided between those who said that the process should move quickly to end the political vacuum resulting from the suspension of the President's powers and those who expected that due process deliberations would move deliberately and that a fair trial, in the end, would convince the people to support the court's final decisions.

During its third hearing, one week prior to the April 15 election day, the Constitutional Court ruled to accept the National Assembly Impeachment Committee's request to call four witnesses involved in the corruption scandal allegations associated with Presidential aides. It also asked the National Election Commission to turn over its records concerning the President's alleged election law violations. The court did not insist, however, that the President make an appearance in court, although it did not rule out such a possibility at a future date.

The latest chapter in the political saga of presidential impeachment indicated more than a failure of political leadership. It was a reflection of deeper structural problems in Korea's new democracy. It offered a dramatic demonstration of the problems of divided government. A government with both a popularly-elected president and a popularly-elected parliament required close cooperation between the two branches of government, which did not exist during the first year of President Roh Moo-hyun's administration. Such a working relationship and coordination was essential in order to prevent gridlock and stalemate in conducting the business of government.

With the Uri Party victory in the general election, Roh acquired a renewed political mandate to press ahead with his reform agenda. This agenda included among others a constitutional amendment that would establish either "a parliamentary cabinet system" or "a shared power presidency." Roh was on record as favoring discussions of a constitutional amendment that would start in 2006 but be concluded in early 2007, so that the new election rule would apply to the next National Assembly elections in 2008.

Roh was also on record as favoring reforming the election system so as to remove excessive regionalism by introducing mid-sized electoral districts. How and why replacing the existing single-member

district systems, in favor of larger electoral districts with multiple members would make the parliamentary election more efficient and democratic was, however, not fully explained. The proposition was questionable at best, and required further specification. This was also true for the concept of reforming the governmental systems into either “a shared power presidency” or “a parliamentary cabinet system.” The agenda of government reform must be handled with political tact and skill, however.

In a larger sense one must realize that institutions do matter for Korea’s new democracy, but “institutional tinkering” like developing new election laws and constitutional amendments may represent “technical fixes” for Korea’s democratic institution-building. “Building social capital” which is not easy by any means, is “the key to making democracy work” for Korea as for all other old and new democracies.²⁰ Building “networks of civic engagement” is a form of social capital.

Korea’s new democracy recently excelled in the critical area of democratic consolidation, for instance, as was manifested in the 2002 double elections for local representatives and the presidency. The campaigns associated with these elections were heated indeed. They involved an unfolding political drama and civil society group activism evident in dynamic electoral processes.

The latest changes to the electoral system for the National Assembly, timed with the 17th general election, illustrated why “institutional tinkering” might not be as important as “building social capital” for Korea’s new democracy. The newly-elected 17th National Assembly would operate under the new electoral rules of a two-ballot system, voting for the candidate and for the party.

When it was enacted by the outgoing National Assembly overriding the old rule passed four years earlier, it was praised as an example of a successful political reform measure. However, without involving the civic society groups in the process of legislation, such as holding public hearings and eliciting testimony by civic organizations like the Citizens Coalition for Economic Justice, and the Citizens Council for Fair Elections, no legislative enactment was likely to further the cause of building social capital.

According to this new rule, voters would choose a candidate as well as a party in each of the 243 single-member electoral districts. Any party that garnered three percent of the overall vote or elected a minimum of five members would be eligible to share in an additional 56 proportional-representation seats. At the same time, the total membership had been reduced from 299 to 273 in 2000, as a way of furthering efficiency in the hard-economic time of the Asian financial

crisis. The relevant question has become whether an increase of 26 seats in 2004 to 299 constitutes a “qualitative” improvement in Korea’s new democracy? Is the price tag too high for an enlarged house of deputies? This appears to be more like institutional tinkering than dealing with substantive issues of building social capital that relate to democratic institution building.

The historical significance of the political developments of 2004, however, cannot be overlooked. South Korea has written a new political chapter with the Uri Party’s electoral victory. It more than tripled its seats from 49 to 152, thereby capturing a simple majority in the 299-seat unicameral legislature. “Our people wrote a new history of elections,” acting President Goh Kun said in a televised address, adding “With this election, I hope a new era of politics of co-existence and cooperation will be born.” He also reminded the populace that the government and all political parties should concentrate on reviving the economy.

The April 15, 2004 election marked the first time a liberal party won control of a hitherto conservative chamber in 43 years. The pro-Roh Uri Party could now push through a reformist legislation stymied by opponents during the first year of the Roh administration. The word “Uri” in Korean means “Our” and the party’s full name is the “Yollin Uri dang” meaning “Open Our Party” or “Open and Participatory Our Party.” A new political era of liberal domination in Korean politics is now in the making, the first time since the Second Republic (1960-61) was overthrown by the military coup led by then-Major General Park Chung-Hee, on May 16, 1961.

The emergence of a socialist party as a legitimate political force in the 2004 general election also reflected a growing political maturity of South Korea’s new democracy. For the first time, the Democratic Labor Party was able to win parliamentary seats in a general election; by winning ten seats it emerged as the third ranking party in the National Assembly, replacing the MDP that suffered a devastating election defeat. As a result, organized labor would now have legitimate representation in the legislature, and would no longer need to resort to violence as a strategy for pursuing its interests. The socialist party representation in parliament should be welcomed as a landmark along the path of South Korea’s democracy-building.

The demise of the MDP, which held 69 seats in the National Assembly but ended up with only nine seats, was taken as a crushing defeat. It remains to be seen whether the MDP will finally split or resurrect itself. MDP Chairman Chough Soon-hyung announced his resignation after forming an emergency committee to call for a national caucus. The MDP was launched by then-President Kim Dae-jung,

timed with the 2000 general election, but its roots could be traced as far back as the ROK's founding in 1948.

Enacting major reform bills in the National Assembly did not have smooth sailing in 2004, however. The eleventh hour compromise, on the last day of the plenary session of the National Assembly, avoided disaster and assured the passage of the New Year's regular budget and several other important bills, including the Iraq deployment extension bill and the "Korean New Deal" investment act. The debates on three of the four contentious reform bills were also postponed to February's extraordinary assembly. These included the repeal of the National Security Law, a bill to investigate past malpractice, and a controversial private education bill.

The ruling Uri and opposition parties worked out a grand compromise on a set of contentious reform bills, including the repeal of the National Security Law. The two sides have tentatively agreed to enact a special and alternate national security law. The National Assembly subsequently passed the Basic Law for Truth and Reconciliation Act, also known as the history law, to go into effect in November 2005. This law is part of a larger attempt by the Roh government to lay the nation's troubled recent past to rest. Under a bill passed in February, an investigatory team will be looking into collaboration with the Japanese occupiers, while committees in the National Intelligence Service (NIS), police and military are unearthing dark episodes in the agencies' own past.²¹

This law covers major historical incidents for the past 100 years, dating from the conclusion of the 1905 Protectorate Treaty, leading to Korea's loss of sovereignty to Japan. Scheduled to take four years, with a possible extension of another two, the law intends to target at both the leftists and the rightists as well as at uncovering irregularities by North Korean and South Korean authorities. Of 299 registered lawmakers, 250 took part in the National Assembly vote, which broke down 159 in favor, 73 against and 18 abstentions. As the probe is set to challenge old certainties, the findings could lead to history books being rewritten. Not surprisingly, supporters called it an attempt "to set history straight," while opponents called it an attempt "to turn history on its head."²²

The political fortunes of the ruling and opposition parties in the National Assembly continue to change with the ebb and flow of the popularity contest of party politicians. In the May 2005 by-elections for six parliamentary seats, seven mayoral contests, and ten city council seats, the ruling Uri Party failed to capture a single seat. The opposition GNP fared better, winning five of the six parliamentary races, whereas an independent defeated the ruling party candidate in the

district of the proposed site of a new administrative city and the MDP candidate won the mayoral city race in Mokpo in the South Cholla province. One year after the April 2004 general election, the ruling Uri Party had lost its precarious status of controlling the simple majority in the National Assembly.²³ Now, losing its majority status in parliament, the Roh administration may need to form a coalition with other parties to press on the major reform bills passage through the National Assembly.²⁴

Post-Election Politics as the Art of the Possible

The clash of democratic values and future visions was evident in the contest between the populist style of liberal politics to which the Uri Party and President Roh Moo-hyun subscribe, and the more conservative orientation the opposition parties of the GNP and the MDP seem to represent. The DLP with ten seats may hold the key to the ruling Uri Party future control of the legislative calendar. The political passion and ideological zeal displayed by politicians during the 2004 confrontation, however, had to be tempered by practical considerations needed to reconcile the competing sets of rival interests. This reconciliation was essential to resolve conflicting political, social, and economic interests.

The essence of practical politics is the art of the possible, and herein lies the challenge for future political leaders in coalition-building. As power is the key value in politics, the art and science of politics deals with the question of the allocation of authority, influence, and power. Politics, to borrow a term from political scientist David Easton, deals with the "authoritative allocation of values for a society." Power and authority constitute the key values for politics, much as money and wealth are key economic values.

Power as a political value is necessary in order to achieve the higher societal goals of morality and ethics. Hence, power by nature is relative as a value, although an absolute claim is often advanced in the name of politics. Political leadership in Korea's new democracy must learn how to achieve the political settlement of conflicts through a "give and take" art of negotiation and bargaining. Herein may be a way to avert future failures in the politics of compromise of the type so dramatically manifest in the impeachment politics as well as the passage of the reform bills.

Conclusion

The Korean experiment in democratic self-governance, in the final analysis, has been no better or no worse than the quality of the political participation of its citizenry. As voters, the people choose their

leaders as agents and representatives, who are held accountable to the will and wishes of the people. As such, the voters are "the principal," while the representatives are "the agents." Skeptics argue that the Korean experiment in democratic self-government is faltering, while optimists contest it has, so far, proven to be vigorous and viable.

Despite the recent report on scandals involving politicians, prospects for South Korea's Sixth Republic turning into an "illiberal democracy" do not seem to be on the horizon for the moment.²⁵ As South Korea continues its path toward democratic consolidation and institution building, the Korean state has become more than a type of "hybrid regime" or "delegative" democracy, as found elsewhere in the world.²⁶ The Korean state instead represents a type of "transformative" regimes and "dynamic" post-Cold War era new democracy. Korea's new democracy -after a journey of more than eighteen years since the 1987 democratic opening -has proven itself to be a resilient and thriving system.

A zero-sum logic, all-or-nothing approach and style, has long dominated South Korean politics and has especially done so during the latest controversy over the politics of the presidential impeachment and parliamentary policies. What Korea's new democracy requires in the future is not so much "a high-risk and high-stake" style of political game but more of a "pluralistic and participatory" style of politics that is based on the genuine desire and commitment to further the common interest of the population at large.

Efforts to achieve democratic self-governance for the Korean people have come a long way since the initial democratic opening in 1987. The interaction between the competing political forces of liberalization, and the democracy movement in civil society have led to the eventual decay of authoritarian rule and a successful democratic transition.

The new political order of the Sixth Republic has gone through several distinct yet overlapping stages: democratic transition, democratic consolidation, institution building, and the maturation of democracy. The democratic transition was relatively smooth and orderly, as contrasted to the process of democratic consolidation through reform. "Democratic" institution building also proved to be a painstaking and continuing process. South Korea, in my view, is becoming a hybrid system of blending legacies of Confucian culture and ideals of modernization as reflected by the liberal democracy and capitalist market economy.²⁷

Finally, the democratic rebirth and maturation of Korea's Sixth Republic has endured. Despite unknowns and adversity, this new democracy promises to continue to plod ahead. Greater challenges lie

ahead for nurturing democratic norms and the new set of rules for Korean politics.

Endnotes:

¹ Freedom House. *Freedom in the World: the Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*, 2000 and subsequent years, NY: Freedom House, 2004. <http://freedomhouse.org/research/survey2005.htm>.

² Fareed Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom: Illiberal Democracy at Home and Abroad*, Chicago: Norton, 2003: 15.

³ The Roh Government has committed itself to focus on four specific values or tenets: principles and trust, fairness and transparency, dialogue and compromise, and decentralization of power and autonomy. These guidelines applying to each of the 12 major sectors, include building a firm foundation for peace on the Korean Peninsula, continuing reform politics based on participation and consolidation, developing South Korea into an economic hub of Northeast Asia, achieving national harmony and gender equality, and building a labor-management relationship for social consolidation. <http://english.president.go.kr/warp/en/news/> accessed January 27, 2005.

⁴ "Roh Apologizes for Funding Scandal," *CNN.com*, January 14, 2004.

⁵ The probe into President Roh's campaign funds continued as prosecutors indicted eight of his aides for suspicion of illegal fundraising up to US\$5 million. "South Korea: Presidential Aides Charged," *New York Times*, December 30, 2003, A-8.

⁶ President Roh concluded his press conference with a reaffirmation of his political philosophy: "Above all, politics should be advanced, and a fair and transparent system should take hold, and civic consciousness should be matured" "In particular, the elimination of corruption represents a hurdle Korea must surmount in its march toward becoming an advanced country. Past administrations invariably vowed to eliminate corruption but failed to make headway. The Participatory Government has provided a momentum to ferret out corruption."

⁷ Mr. Chung Dong-young subsequently became Roh's Minister of Unification, and also assuming an important post as Chairman of the National Security Council. On the election front as many as 60 successful candidates, according to the National Election Commission report, may be subject to investigation for possible violation of campaign laws in 2004. In the 2000 general election, as many as 15 lawmakers had their elections nullified or were forced to resign due to the court proceedings and convictions for their election irregularities.

⁸ The survey also revealed a higher cognition level by voters: 42 percent answered that they knew "almost all" the names of candidates running for office in their districts, while 45.8 percent said that they knew the public

pledges of the candidate they supported. Also, 54.8 percent of voters indicated that they were more concerned with the party that the candidate belonged to than with the personal ability of the candidate (an improvement over 38.5 percent in an earlier survey). This survey had a 95 percent confidence interval with a 3.1 plus or minus percentage margin of error ("Large Voter Turnout Expected on April 15: Survey." *Digital Chosunilbo*. April 11, 2004).

⁹ Subsequent press reports by other sources, however, indicated that the voting by the nine judges was split with three in favor of impeachment, five against, and one abstaining.

¹⁰ "South Korea's Roh Quits Party," *CNN.com*, October 1, 2003.

¹¹ "Roh: No confidence in doing my job," *CNN.com*, October 12, 2003. Also, see Larkin, John and Donald MacIntyre, "Crisis of Confidence." *Times Asia* 162, no. 15, October 20, 2003.

¹² The request for the court ruling was made by a former speaker of the National Assembly, MDP member Lee Man-sup.

¹³ "ROK Parliament Overrides President's Veto of Slush Fund Probe," *CNN.com*, December 4, 2003. The last time the parliament overrode a veto was in 1954 when then-President Syngman Rhee dismissed a criminal procedure bill allowing the National Assembly to demand the release of a lawmaker in custody. Lawmakers said then that the enacted legislation was needed to prevent the government from exploiting judicial power to suppress the opposition.

¹⁴ "S. Korea opposition to end boycott," *CNN.com*, December 3, 2003.

¹⁵ "Foreign Investment on Decline for 4 Years," *Korea Herald*, September 1, 2003.

¹⁶ "Five-Day Workweek Bill Passed Despite Protest," *Korea Herald*, September 1, 2003.

¹⁷ "Roh apologises for funding scandal," *CNN.com*, January 14, 2004.

¹⁸ "South Korea: Presidential Aides Charged," *New York Times*, December 30, 2003.

¹⁹ Along with two independents Chung Mong-joon was elected as a member of National Unity 21, the political party that he himself founded.

²⁰ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993: 185.

²¹ "History Law Passes," *Digital Chosunilbo.Com*, May 3, 2005.

²² Ibid.

²³ "Ruling Party Trounced in By-Elections," *Digital Chosunilbo.Com*, May 4, 2005.

²⁴ "Roh Puts Debate on Coalition Gov't. to the People." *Digital Chosunilbo.com*, July 5, 2005.

²⁵ Zakaria, *The Future of Freedom, op. cit.* As for an example of the reported scandals unfolding, see "Presidential Aides Quit in Haengdam Island Scandal." *Digital Chosunilbo.com.*, May 27, 2005.

²⁶ Larry Diamond, "Thinking About Hybrid Regimes: Elections Without Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (April 2002); Guillermo O'Donnell, "Delegative Democracy," *Journal of Democracy* 5, no. 1 (January 1994); Larry Diamond, *Developing Democracy Toward Consolidation*, Baltimore, Md., 1999: 34-42, 42-60.

²⁷ As for the authors views on the latter point, see: Young Whan Kihl, *Transforming Korean Politics: Democracy, Reform and Culture*. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2005).