

KOREAN POLITICAL CULTURE AND U.S.-KOREAN RELATIONS

Eun-Ha Kim

I. INTRODUCTION

With an ever more open and participatory democracy, South Korea's complex and rapidly evolving political culture was a major factor in U.S.-ROK relations. The volatility of current Korean politics was illustrated by the outcome of provincial elections on May 31, 2006, in which President Roh Moo-hyun's Uri Party won only one of 16 key races. In parliamentary elections just two years earlier, his party had won 152 seats, representing an astounding three-fold increase in its share of the National Assembly's total of 299 seats. The 2004 parliamentary victory resulted in part from sympathy votes after the then-strong conservative opposition overreached by attempting to impeach Roh over relatively small violations of campaign finance regulations.



Elections in Rural Korea

Roh's own election as president in December 2002 came after polls early in the year showed the conservative candidate, Lee Hoi-chang, to be holding a commanding lead after four years of rule by progressive President Kim Dae-jung. (South Koreans generally use "progressive" rather than "liberal" or "left-wing"; the latter suffered from a longstanding, widespread popular association with "pro-North Korea" and "pro-Communist.") Roh, however, squeaked out a narrow victory by demanding a more equal U.S.-Korean relationship amidst massive popular protests against the U.S. South Koreans had been outraged by a U.S. court-martial's acquittal of two U.S. soldiers for the deaths of two Korean schoolgirls in a traffic accident. After 2004, President Roh's personal popularity dropped more or less steadily. By the end of 2006 it had reached a low of 10%, and opinion polls again projected a generic conservative candidate to have a large lead in the December 2007 presidential election.

Such political volatility was also reflected in South Koreans' views of the U.S.-ROK relationship. During the first half of President Roh's five-year term, what many observers branded as anti-Americanism embroiled Korean politics. Although after his election Roh himself sought to stabilize ties with the U.S. and generally cooperated with the U.S. on issues involving U.S. Forces Korea (USFK), President Bush's hard-line foreign policy toward North Korea became another focus of popular anger toward the U.S., especially after his inclusion of North Korea among the "axis of evil" countries in his first State of the Union address in January 2002. In 2003, opinion surveys found South Koreans harboring stronger anti-American sentiments than the people of any other U.S. ally. An opinion poll the following year showed that South Koreans viewed the U.S. as a greater threat to ROK national security than North Korea. By the second half of Roh's presidency, however, there had been a significant shift in popular opinion. In 2006, one survey found 18% more South Koreans supporting a stronger U.S.-ROK alliance than in 2003, and South Korean approval of U.S. policy toward North Korea had also increased substantially.

II. SOURCES OF KOREAN POLITICAL VOLATILITY

Such political volatility had many sources. Most observers attributed the changed atmosphere primarily to leadership and policy failures on the part of the Roh administration. They cited mounting domestic economic disparities caused by economic stagnation, a high real unemployment rate, and the existence of a real estate bubble in the greater Seoul area, where nearly half of the country's population of 49 million resided. As a result, most Koreans reckoned management capability to be the top qualification needed in the next president. It was thus no coincidence that, as of the end of 2006, opinion polls had Hyundai CEO-turned-politician Lee Myung-bak with a large lead the

presidential race.

Similarly, anti-American sentiments were generally attributed to specific issues and problems. From the fall of 1999, beginning with Associated Press's revelation of a U.S. massacre of South Korean civilians at Nogun-ri in the opening weeks of the Korean War, the South Korean media focused on American, especially USFK, misbehavior. A series of major stories over the next three years included an alleged increase in violent attacks on the Korean public by USFK personnel, the dumping of toxic formaldehyde in the Han River in Seoul by a USFK mortuary worker, "unfair" U.S. positions during negotiations for a revision of the U.S.-ROK Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) establishing USFK personnel's legal status in Korea, a training incident at a U.S. Air Force target range near a South Korean village, and even an Australian referee's call against a South Korean short-track skater at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah.

South Korean media coverage of the deaths of the two schoolgirls in the USFK traffic accident in 2002 thus represented only the climax of a series of media reports about the U.S. As a result, South Korean popular support for the withdrawal of the U.S. troops increased by 10% between 1997 and 2002. Then, after Roh Moo-hyun's election as president in December 2002, as mentioned above, the South Korean media's focus of critical reporting about the U.S. shifted toward President Bush's "hard-line" approach to North Korea.

However, a focus on particular misdeeds and alleged misdeeds of the Korean progressives domestically and of the U.S. in its dealings with Korea could not provide a full or even an adequate explanation of the volatility of South Korean opinion. It was necessary to look deeper, especially at the complex and changing South Korean political culture.

1. THE SENSE OF KOREAN NATIONAL VICTIMHOOD

Koreans long had a strong sense of identity as a unique and ethnically homogeneous nation. Surrounded by the much larger states of China and Japan, Korea was a "shrimp among whales" and historically suffered numerous foreign invasions and raids. During the Goryeo (918-1392) and Joseon (1392-1910) periods, Korea suffered an average of one or two foreign raids per year. In the modern era, Japan fought two wars for control of Korea, first with China (1894-1895) and then with Russia (1904-1905). But it was Japan's harsh colonial rule of Korea from 1910 to 1945—Japan attempted to eliminate Koreans' identity as a separate nation—that embued Korean national identity with a particularly

strong sense of being a victim of foreign powers. The Korean name for this feeling was *han*, a complex and amorphous notion that was very inadequately interpreted as "grudge" or "resentment." The feeling persisted long after the ROK's engagement with the world and its dramatic economic development based on external trade. Thus, in an opinion poll conducted in 2006, about 70% of South Koreans said that Korea had not been treated correctly by the international community even in recent years.

Most Koreans—but few Americans—were aware that the U.S. government secretly assured Japan in 1905 that it would not interfere with Japan's ambitions on the Korean Peninsula, in exchange for Japan's recognition of the priority of American interests in the Philippines. In the ensuing decades, the United States ignored numerous pleas by Koreans seeking the overthrow of Japanese rule. With Japan's defeat in WWII, the U.S. again bitterly disappointed Koreans by dividing the country in half and occupying it with the USSR. The U.S. also insisted on a three-year trusteeship before restoring Korea's national sovereignty, despite the fervent wishes of the Korean people for immediate independence. Although unintended, the United States' decision to divide the peninsula could not be reversed. The resulting situation prevented the realization of Koreans' half-century-long effort for national independence based on their ethnic and cultural identity. Thus was laid the basis for many South Koreans to direct their anti-imperialistic feelings against the United States.

2. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Although the potential for anti-American sentiments thus already existed in Korean national identity many decades ago, the experience of the Korean War turned the generation that experienced it in a very different direction. Koreans over age 50 perceived the U.S. as their savior from North Korean aggression and as an indispensable ally. During the decades of the Cold War, Koreans were generally pro-American and staunchly anti-Communist. After the Korean War, most South Koreans focused domestically on lifting their families and their nation out of poverty, and, externally, on confronting North Korea and the greater communist threat in alliance with the United States. South Korean national identity was largely defined by anti-Communism and, to a lesser extent, anti-Japanese feeling. Authoritarian South Korean presidents, backed by military force, after Major General Park Chung Hee's 1960 *coup d'état* repressed dissent as pro-North Korean and pro-communist. To this end, despite all of the events of succeeding decades, the older generation in Korea in 2006 remained largely pro-American, and, as Figure 1 shows, considerably more conservative than progressive.

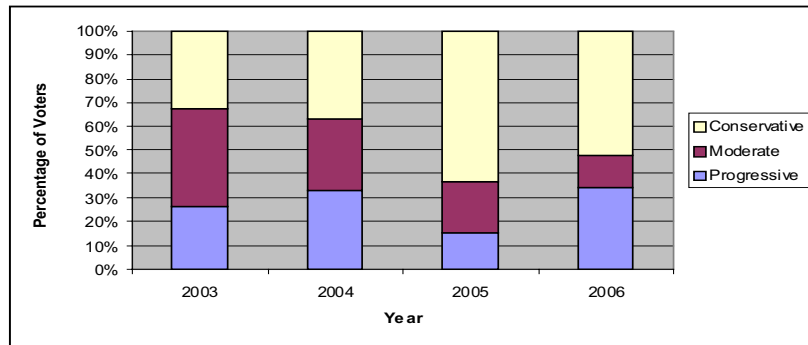


Figure 1. Political Leanings of Koreans Aged 50 and Above

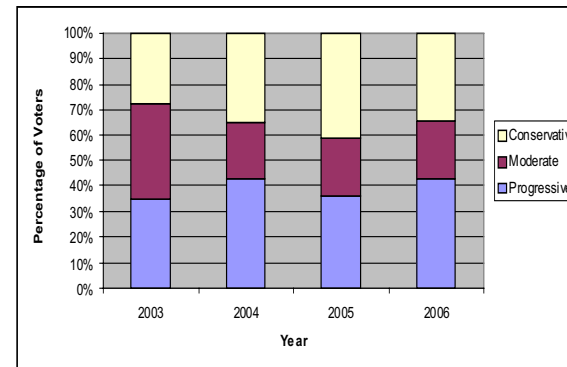
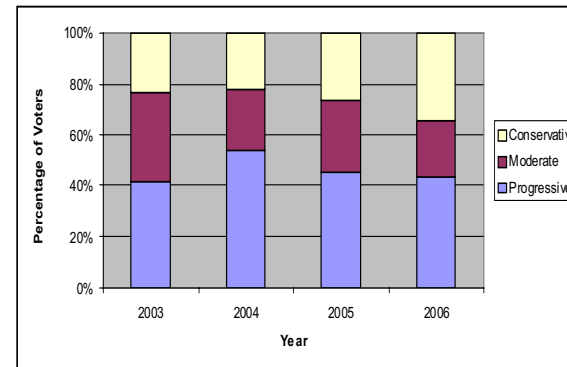
Source: Gallup Korea

In contrast, the *386 generation* had a very different formative experience and developed a more progressive and nationalistic stance than their elders. (The phrase “386 generation” was wordplay on the name of a well-known Intel microprocessor; it referred to Koreans who at the time were in their 30s, had entered college in the 1980s, and were born in the 1960s.) After Park Chung Hee’s assassination in October 1979, Korean students and intellectuals aimed for an end to authoritarian, military-dominated rule, but General Chun Doo Hwan staged a *coup d’état* only two months later. Students staged massive, nationwide demonstrations against Chun in May of the following year, and Chun responded with police and military force. In the city of Gwangju, the military acted with particular brutality, killing hundreds of young protesters. While Chun proceeded to firm up his grip on the levers of power, the Gwangju incident denied his government popular legitimacy and outraged and emboldened an entire generation of Koreans against him and his military-backed rule.

It was the Gwangju incident especially that also disposed the 386 generation to dislike and distrust the United States. Younger Koreans felt that the U.S. had the power to prevent Chun’s rise to power but preferred to deal with an illegitimate and thus pliable leader rather than a strong, democratic South Korea. They cited in particular the United States’ exercise of operational control (OPCON) over ROK forces as indicative of the United States’ influence over South Korea in general and over the ROK military in particular. Chun exacerbated the situation by waging a “campaign of distortion” to persuade Koreans that the U.S. government under President Jimmy Carter and, later, President Reagan, was more supportive of his government than was actually the case. But the younger generation’s perception of American perfidy was only strengthened when newly elected President Ronald Reagan made President Chun one of his first foreign guests at the White House in early 1981. The fact that the meeting was

part of a deal to save the life of dissident leader and Jeolla native Kim Dae-jung barely registered amidst the anger that younger Koreans felt toward Chun and the U.S. Thus, anti-American sentiment, which had long been dormant in Korean national identity, was kindled among the Korean 386 generation.

Throughout the 1980s, the protests of the 386 generation were directed almost as much against the U.S. as against Chun himself. Student activists committed a series of arson attacks against official U.S. cultural centers and other American facilities, including some that resulted in Korean fatalities. Since pro-Americanism had been associated with anti-North Korean views in the ROK, it was perhaps natural that the new anti-Americans tended to be very skeptical of the ROK’s anti-North Korean propaganda, and some younger South Koreans even became pro-North Korean. The more progressive ideological orientation of the 386 generation remained to the present day. (See Figures 2-3.)



Figures 2 and 3. Political Leanings of Koreans in Their 30s & 40s, resp.

Source: Gallup Korea.

Eventually, after seventeen consecutive days of massive street demonstrations in 1987, with the participation not only of young people but also of middle-aged, middle-class Koreans, the Chun government promised real reform. A new South Korean constitution ensured democracy by providing for a direct, popular presidential election and limiting the president to a single, non-renewable five-year term. It took another decade, however, before younger South Koreans, whose sole purpose had been to replace authoritarianism, could develop civil society and dominate Korean politics, leading to the election of Kim Dae-jung as president in 1997.

3. CONFUCIAN PATRIARCHIALISM

Kim Dae-jung, while a lifelong opponent of right-wing governments, nevertheless represented the patriarchal, Confucian political culture of the older generation. With Korean political parties based less on ideology and policy than on the personal leadership of such charismatic “bosses,” the “three Kims” (including President Kim Young Sam [1993-1998] and Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil [1971-1975; 1998-2000]) dominated Korean politics from 1993 through 2002. They ran their parties like modern fiefdoms where, according to Georgetown University Professor David Steinberg, “loyalty becomes personal, not institutional.”

Party leaders engaged in opportunistic party mergers and alliances, regardless of ideology and policy, in their attempts to build winning presidential election coalitions. (See Figure 4.) For example, as leader of the progressive Millennium Democratic Party, Kim Dae-jung in 1997 aligned himself with conservative Kim Jong Pil, and progressive Roh Moo-hyun allied in 2002 with Chung Mong Joon, the conservative scion of the Hyundai conglomerate. Not surprisingly, both of these awkward alliances soon faltered, the Roh-Chung tie-up collapsing even before the presidential election was held. Transparency International thus ranked Korea 42nd out of 163 countries in 2006 in terms of popular confidence in the integrity of politicians, the lowest among all members of the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).

1987 Election	1988 Election	1992 Election	1996 Election	1997 Election
Democratic Justice Party				New National Party (1997)
Reunification Democratic Party	Democratic Liberal Party (January 1990)		New Korea Party (1996)	Grand National Party (1997)
New Democratic Republican Party			United Liberal Democrats (1996)	
Party for Peace and Democracy		Democratic Party	Democratic Party (1995)	
Hangyora*			National Congress for New Politics (1995)	
People's*		Reunification National Party* (1992)		
	* Party dissolved			

Figure 4. Mergers and Splits among Political Parties in South Korea between 1987 and 1996

Source: Hoon Jeong, “Electoral Politics and Political Parties,” in *Institutional Reform and Democratic Consolidation in Korea*, Larry Diamond and Doh Chull Shin, ed. (California: Hoover Institution Press, 2000), 58.

Roh Moo-hyun won election as president in December 2002 in significant part due to the support of the 386 generation, who hoped he would lead Korea beyond the era of the three Kims and its Confucian political traditions and patterns. Roh's efforts to deconstruct the imperial presidency and to overcome regionalism were genuine, but his lack of leadership experience and policy coherence resulted in many failures. He himself was also too mired in the old political antagonisms, resulting in increased political polarization and, ultimately, a conservative trend overall, particularly among Koreans in their 20s. (See Figures 5-6.) Ironically, attitudes toward the U.S. actually improved as Roh's time in office passed.

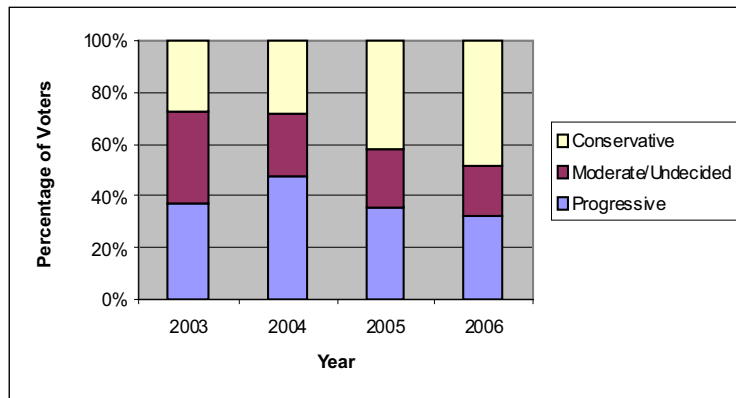


Figure 5. Political Leanings of Korean Voters Overall

Source: Gallup Korea

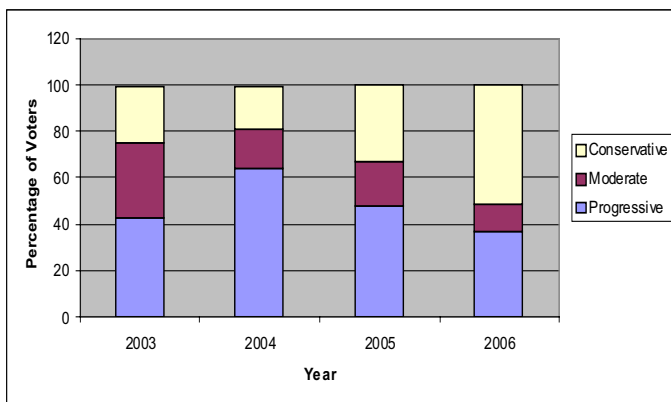


Figure 6. Political Leanings of Koreans in Their 20s

Source: Gallup Korea

4. REGIONAL DIFFERENCES

The three Kims bequeathed another Confucian tradition that also complicated the effort for democratic consolidation in South Korea and hurt U.S.-Korean relations: intensified regionalism within South Korea. The 7th presidential election, contested in 1971 between Kim Dae-jung and Park Chung Hee, resulted in a pattern of great electoral rivalry between the Honam area (consisting of North and South Jeolla Provinces in the southwestern part of the country) and the Yeongnam area (consisting of North and South Gyeongsang Provinces in the southeast). (Park was from Yeongnam, while Kim was from Jeolla.)

Since the democratization of 1987, most South Korean presidential candidates based their election strategies on the regional divide. Kim Dae-jung, for example, received 87% of Honam votes in 1987, 89% percent in 1992, and 93% in 1997, while Kim Young Sam received 69% of Yeongnam votes in 1992. The extremely one-sided voting in Honam reflected the fact that the people of the region felt they were discriminated against and victimized by central administrations dominated by presidents from Yeongnam.

III. THE EMERGING NEW GENERATION

With the rapidity of the ROK's economic, political, and social development, it was not surprising that the post-386 generation, with very different formative experiences than the 386 generation, would also have different views about Korea and its relations with the world. Raised after democratization and the end of the Cold War, and justly proud of the ROK's enormous accomplishments, the generation in their 20s no longer defined their identity against "the other" as their elders had, but by their own Koreanness. They enjoyed the ROK's status not only as an economic and technological power—Korea was the world's 12th-largest economy—but also as a new cultural force, especially in East Asia, where Korean music and dramas became very popular. National pride, not national humiliation, was their dominant feeling about their country.

Young Koreans were more pragmatic than ideological, more democratic than dogmatic. In the world's most wired country, virtually universal high-speed access to the Internet empowered them. They felt that participatory democracy was their birthright, also due to the growth of civil society throughout the 1990s and into the current decade in the form of tens of thousands of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). On the other hand,

having not participated in the demonstrations of the 1980s—for them the Gwangju incident was almost as distant a memory as the Vietnam War to young Americans—the new generation of South Koreans was not only more individualistic but also less political than their elders. In one survey in 2006, only 6% of college students said that their student government should focus more on political and social issues rather than on campus and educational concerns.

Young South Koreans also viewed North Korea and the U.S. differently from the 386 generation. While North Korea also appeared to them to be an obstinate brother, more to be pitied than deterred, it did not lead them to espouse pro-North Korean romanticism. For economic and security reasons, they were more opposed to the idea of rapid reunification with North Korea than were the older generations. Similarly, even though they also resented what they regarded as a unilateral U.S. foreign policy and an unequal alliance with the U.S., nearly eight out of ten Koreans in their 20s said they recognized the importance of the U.S.-ROK alliance—comparable to the figure of nine out of ten on the part of the Korean War generation. In other words, the emerging new generation distinguished Korea as a state from that as a nation and its civic/political identity from its ethnic/cultural identity.

IV. PROSPECTS

With the South Korean political cultural developing rapidly along with the country's economic and technological growth, a new sense of Korean identity—of a positive pride in being Korean—was beginning to supplant the older sense of victimhood and humiliation. South Korea's status as the world's most “wired” country was also contributing to the maturation of a participatory democracy. Thus, despite remaining challenges and uncertainties, there were many reasons to be optimistic about the prospects for South Korea. It also appeared likely that these developments would support the continuation and even strengthening of the U.S.-ROK alliance, *if* the United States returned to its own foreign policy traditions of multilateralism and genuine respect for human rights.