

that civil society can serve as a third party buffer, it also has the potential to substantially affect the course of Korean politics by working outside traditional political power channels.

As Lee Myung-bak embarks on his five-year term as president of South Korea, conservative CSOs will likely find more receptive ears for their policies among political elites. But this does not guarantee that the interests of civil society and the government will necessarily coincide. If the experience of progressive CSOs under the Roh Moo-hyun administration is any indication, Grand National Party officials and New Right NGOs may clash as often as they cooperate. Meanwhile, the South Korean left, stranded in the cold after December's elections, might take solace in knowing that its civil society representatives can continue to work for progressive causes even as the political winds change.

DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION AND FOREIGN RELATIONS UNDER LEE MYUNG-BAK

Shaw-Lin Chaw

I. INTRODUCTION

It is a democracy: not as old or as deeply rooted as Japan's, nor as politically fractious as Taiwan's. Nevertheless, after the successful election of four presidents in a minimalist democratic climate of largely free and fair elections, and a fifth president in December 2007, South Korea is certainly a democracy with some measure of vibrancy. Cited by the *New York Times* in 1995 as a viable "East Asian model of prosperity and democracy," based on fairness, equality, and the rule of law, the country survived the economic hard landing of the 1997 Asian financial crisis to emerge even stronger and more invigorated. South Korea is currently the world's 13th largest economy, and it climbed up 12 spots last year to secure the rank of 11th best country for global business in a poll by the World Economic Forum.

From the evolution of civil societies to a strong and independent news media, South Korea now has all the institutional underpinnings of a democracy. It has also experienced genuine power transitions: leadership changed hands peacefully in 1998 from the conservative government of Kim Young-sam to the first liberal dissident president, Kim Dae-jung, and to Roh Moo-hyun five years later. Power will return to the conservatives after those two liberal administrations. Lee Myung-bak will assume office on February 25, 2008.

Despite numerous setbacks and limited successes over the years, South Korea's democratization story—especially during the Sixth Republic, from 1987 to the present—has been an astounding one. With a focus on the recent presidential election, this paper examines how the leaders of this medium-sized state

geographically with a population of just 50 million have had the political clout to cause an outsized impact in East Asia. Hardly a nondescript nation, South Korea has played a critical and decisive role in the security of the Korean peninsula through its engagement with the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) under the Sunshine Policy of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun. South Korea's at times rocky relations with the U.S. over the past decade have also made both sides question the sustainability of the U.S.-ROK alliance. The final section of the paper analyzes the direction of South Korea's engagement with the DPRK and the country's alliance with the U.S. under the rule of the new incumbent president Lee Myung-bak.

II. POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION INTO THE SIXTH REPUBLIC

For many years after its liberation from Japanese rule in 1948, South Korea muddled through bouts of constitutional disorder and political instability. Civilian activism and attempts at democratic reforms were frequent and well documented, but each time, the efforts were quashed in their infancy, affording little change toward democracy or continuity in reform efforts. The student-led movement of April 19, 1960, scored a momentous victory when it toppled the First Republic under Syngman Rhee, ushering the way for the first democratic government. However, as Samuel Huntington and other political theorists of "stable democracy" have pointed out, the drastic transition from a dictatorship to a democracy entailed dangers of social disorder and political instability. South Korea's first democratic government lasted barely a year before military control returned via a coup staged by Army general Park Chung-hee. Despite presidential elections in 1967, 1971, and 1978, Park's iron rule was largely uncontested over 16 years until his assassination by the KCIA director in 1979.

In 1987, when Roh Tae-woo took over from Chun Doo-hwan after Chun's eight years of authoritarian rule—making the famous June 29 declaration that called for a direct national election and a revision of the country's constitution—the first seeds of liberal democracy were sown. Roh Tae-woo eventually won the presidency with less than one third of the popular vote, because the opposition candidates and longtime political rivals Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung failed to work together to present a single strong candidacy. In 1992, however, democratic transition came to fruition when Kim Young-sam won the presidential election officially as a civilian candidate, putting a decisive end to military surrogate rule.

III. RESULTS OF THE 2007 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

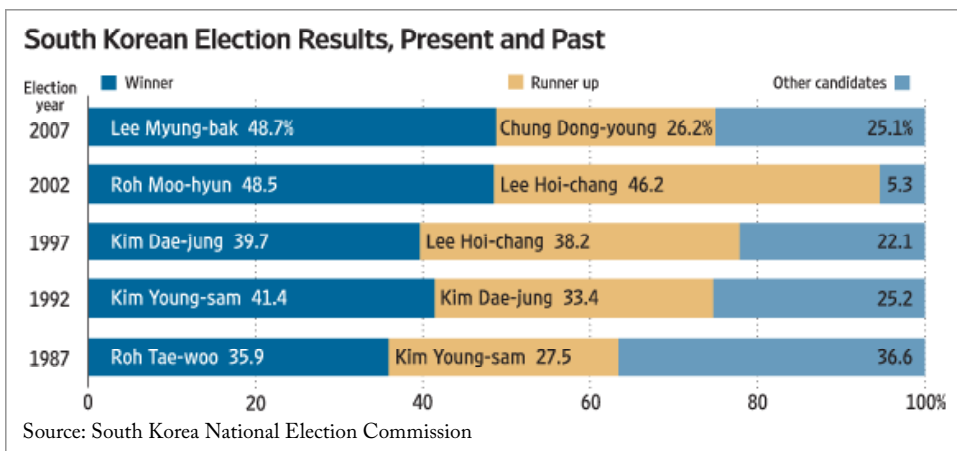
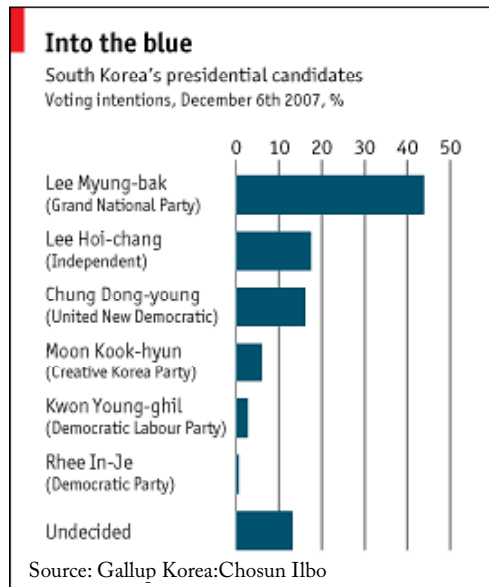
The results of the 2007 presidential election were telling, and one message in particular resonated. Showing signs of ideological fatigue and a general consensus to seek a paradigm shift, the South Koreans have opted for economic progress and pragmatism over the liberal rhetoric espoused by Chung Dong-young or the hard-line conservative stance on North Korea adopted by Lee Hoi-chang. By choosing to embrace Lee Myung-bak, the "economy president" (despite bad press and allegations of his unsavory business dealings), the people have traded the larger themes that influenced their votes in the past decade—social equality, political change, and reconciliation with the North—for economic well-being. Going back to basics, the people showed that bread-and-butter issues had taken center stage in this election.

South Koreans are plagued by fears of being squeezed out of their economic position by a high-tech Japan on one side and a low-cost China on the other. Viewed in this light, the people's deep-seated desire for economic progress is understandable. Growth has slowed from the heady days of 7 percent to an average of 4.5 percent per annum, a rate slower than that of most Asian economies except for Japan. Small and medium-sized companies are struggling to stay afloat, while real estate prices are skyrocketing and the youth unemployment rate is spiraling to new highs. Against that backdrop, President Lee Myung-bak seems to have captured the hearts and minds of many in a Confucian society that favors meritocracy, hard work, and a strong will. The new president himself suffered through periods of malnutrition and even worked as a garbage collector to put himself through college at Korea University. In spite of those humble beginnings, Lee Myung-bak was fast-tracked and appointed chief executive of Hyundai Engineering and Construction at the age of 35. He went on to lead nine other Hyundai affiliates before entering politics in 1992. His meteoric rise to the top has inspired two Korean television dramas.

Cruising into the Blue House with a popular mandate, Lee Myung-bak caught the attention of South Koreans hungry for change when he outlined his "Korea 747 Vision": to become the world's seventh largest economy, to double the country's GDP per capita to \$40,000 within ten years, and to return to an annual growth rate of 7 percent. Thus far, the former mayor of Seoul has had results that demonstrated his vision is doable. The Cheonggyecheon stream in downtown Seoul, which was paved over for an elevated highway during the development rush of the 1970s, has been restored into a picturesque public park that closely resembles New York's Central Park. Setting an even bigger goal, the president aspires to build a 540-km (approximately 335 miles) inland waterway from Busan to Seoul that would cost 14 trillion won (approximately \$16 billion) to bolster growth, ease road and rail congestion, and create 300,000 jobs.

It seems that Lee Myung-bak can do no wrong. His popularity has not wavered in spite of his questionable business and personal ethics. (The president admitted to falsely listing his children as employees to evade taxes and registering them at separate addresses so he could send them to better schools.) The most serious charge brought against him concerned his involvement in a stock manipulation case at a company called BBK. He was cleared of all charges right before the election in December 2007. In a voting intentions poll done by Chosun Ilbo and Gallup Korea two weeks before the election (refer to figure on the right), Lee Myung-bak held a steady 30 percent lead in opinion polls in a field of 12 candidates, and his aides spoke confidently of capturing more than 50 percent of the popular vote, an unprecedented feat in South Korean elections.

Perhaps desensitized by frequent financial scandals involving *chaebol* (business conglomerate) executives and political leaders, South Koreans chose to bypass moral indignation and pin their hopes on Lee Myung-bak to create an economic miracle. Garnering 48.7 percent of the votes and winning by the biggest margin



Party (GNP) to power after ten years of liberal rule. His closest rival, Chung Dong-young (a former news anchorman and a reunification minister during the Roh Moo-hyun administration from the centrist-liberal camp) ranked second with 26.1 percent, while 72-year-old independent conservative candidate and three-time nominee Lee Hoi-chang was third, with 15.7 percent.

IV. STATE OF DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

Democratic participation in South Korea has ebbed and flowed over the past two decades. Populist support reached a peak during the election of Roh Moo-hyun when ardent young voters rallied for him on the Internet and in the streets, and gave him a dramatic, come-from-behind victory. However, his subsequent failure to deliver on his mandate and meet voters' expectations left the public weary and apathetic toward ideological battles among the political parties. After ten years of liberal rule, the people now see the government as merely an electoral democracy, grossly deficient in delivering on the promises of freedom, accountability, responsiveness, and respect for the rule of law.

Many consider a consolidated democracy to be one in which democratic values and ideals are stable and deeply institutionalized. Scholars who take a "maximalist" position use the label "consolidated" when an accountable civilian government guarantees basic civil rights, such as freedom of expression and assembly, and when society is largely involved in the political process. Those who take a "minimalist" position focus on the existence of free competitive elections with peaceful transfers of power. Although South Korea has made notable strides toward true democracy—satisfying the minimalist position by having political parties, fair elections, and successful transitions of power—critics are divided on the degree of democratic consolidation in South Korea. Many have argued that the country has yet to reach a level of political consolidation to be considered a mature liberal democracy.

To become consolidated, a new democracy like South Korea must achieve deep and broad participation among the masses as well as the political elite. The government's performance must be accountable and responsive to public demands and preferences. On one level, democracy represents political ideals or values to be fulfilled; on another level, it refers to the actual workings of a regime that govern people's lives on a daily basis. The support and participation of the citizens are not only crucial for the democracy's legitimacy but also vital to its effectiveness.

As seen in previous South Korean elections, policy issues were never at the forefront of presidential campaigns, and politicians were often fearful of taking a stand on controversial subjects. Instead, campaigns were usually reduced to

mundslinging, fervent accusations of “money politics,” or advancing personal interests through vote splintering or regional squabbling. Election campaigns used to be emotionally charged events, but the recent campaign was met with growing apathy and attracted little attention: voter turnout was at 62.9 percent, in contrast to a record high of 70.1 percent in 2002, when Roh Moo-hyun was elected.

V. POLITICAL PARTIES AND CONSOLIDATION THEORY

The dilemma of South Korea since its independence from Japanese colonial rule has been the lack of strong, dominant parties that can claim legitimacy through clear ideological mandates that are consistent over time. Political parties are usually born out of participation, legitimacy, and integration, and they develop on the basis of socioeconomic changes such as the growth of transportation, communications, markets, and education. Defying conventional wisdom, the formation of political parties in South Korea developed even before civil society had evolved. As a result of this political peculiarity, the average longevity of political parties is relatively short compared with that in other developed democracies.

Changes in political parties are often fluid: new ruling and opposing parties are formed, dissolved, and reformed with little apparent concern for electoral consequences. Most parties are organized at election time, with the goal of electing a few individuals, and then disbanded once the candidates lose power. Data kept by the Central Election Management Commission estimate that 505 political parties have existed since 1948: the period between 1963 and 1999 alone saw the emergence and subsequent demise of 81 parties. Charting the growth of these parties over time has also shown that ruling parties in South Korea do not exist in themselves; rather, they are created and maintained by various political regimes.

As evident in the election last December, Roh Moo-hyun’s unpopularity among the electoral base spurred the members of his Uri Party to create the United New Democratic Party (UNDP) in an effort to disassociate from him. However, the new party’s candidate, Chung Dong-young, still ranked a distant second to Lee Myung-bak, even after furtive attempts to establish a more united front by merging with the Democratic Party and the Creative Korea Party a month before the election.

Most parties in South Korea also tend to cluster ideologically around the middle, in the realm of centrism and conservatism, differing only in small, local-interest-oriented ways, often leading to voter disorientation and confusion. This has made it difficult for a party to gain a broad popular mandate or gain legitimacy

in the long run. As a result, most South Korean political parties lack adaptability owing to their weak coherence, autonomy, and complexity in organization and administration.

In a study done by Lee Nae-young, a political scientist at Korea University who has been conducting opinion polls on the election, South Korean public opinion has indeed shifted to the center, while the left and right have shrunk considerably. Policy toward North Korea took a backseat in the recent election because differences between the conservatives and the liberals have narrowed substantially since the 2002 election. A general consensus over the DPRK engagement policy has emerged. In the 1997 and 2002 elections, the GNP selected Lee Hoi-chang, a rightwing politician with a hard-line stance against North Korea, as the standard bearer for the party. He lost both campaigns in close fights with Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun respectively. Born into an elite family and the country’s youngest Supreme Court judge when he was 46, Lee Hoi-chang showed an open distaste for Kim Dae-jung’s heedless pursuit of the Sunshine Policy at the expense of issues such as national security, democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. In the 2007 election, however, the GNP moved toward the center, abandoning its traditional stance in favor of an engagement strategy reminiscent of Kim Dae-jung’s softer centrist-liberal Sunshine Policy to broaden the GNP’s appeal and expand its electoral base.

VI. TEN YEARS OF LIBERAL RULE

After the decade-long rule of liberal presidents who promised much and delivered little, South Koreans felt disappointed and impatient for change. Lee Myung-bak’s push for economic progress sharply contrasts with the foremost objectives of both Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun: to democratize South Korean society and reconcile with the DPRK, goals which had once been central to the wishes of the people.

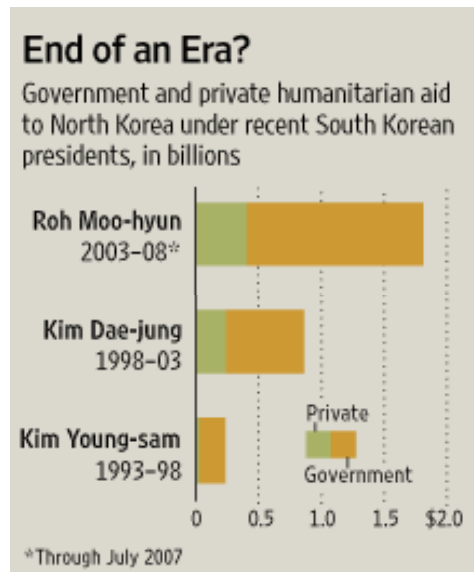
Kim Dae-jung took office at the height of an economic crunch. He was held in high regard for having survived exile, imprisonment, a kidnapping, and several assassination attempts before finally gaining residence in the Blue House. But while the first half of his five-year term was shaped by a flurry of political and economic reforms to make the country more open and democratic, by the time he left office, his government was marked by corruption, political inertia, and a bankrupt policy of engagement. Following a scandal that convicted two of his sons of corruption, Kim Dae-jung’s democratic support hit a snag and his popularity plunged. This was a setback for the people because the president was widely recognized as the voice of accountability, fairness, and transparency, and was considered to be democracy’s best hope in South Korea.

The erosion of populist support continued during Roh Moo-hyun's presidency. He took office with an approval rating of 80 percent and an ambitious agenda to fight endemic political corruption, but he eventually crafted his own impeachment in 2004 when the National Assembly voted to impeach him on charges of incompetence, illegal electioneering and his lack of restraint from making contentious political remarks. His popularity plunged to less than 30 percent after two years, and even though the impeachment attempt failed, his support dipped to 10 percent in the months before the end of his term in 2007.

Roh Moo-hyun squandered his popularity because of his failure to connect with his base of upwardly mobile supporters. Functioning in a political vacuum, he centered his political agenda on ideological disputes rather than the state of the economy, which was the priority for a pragmatic South Korean society eager to get back to the prosperity it had enjoyed before the Asian financial crisis. In a survey conducted in 2001, 27 percent of the respondents thought of democracy solely in economic terms, while just 8 percent thought of it solely in political terms. Those who chose economic values outnumbered those who chose political values by a margin of nearly two to one, at 64 percent and 34 percent respectively.

Engagement with the North: The Sunshine Policy

For many, Kim Dae-jung's Sunshine Policy generated euphoria, but the mood soon turned to skepticism. Kim Jong Il never came to Seoul, as promised, and relations between the U.S. and the DPRK took a turn for the worse. Many South Koreans believe that the Sunshine Policy of being friendly toward the DPRK emboldened Kim Jong Il's regime and brought South Korea little in the way of improved security, even after spending almost \$3 billion in humanitarian aid over the course of two liberal administrations (as shown in the figure below). Generous attempts at peace and engagement resulted in a North Korea that developed and tested nuclear weapons. Public outcry in the South reached new highs when the supposedly historic "peace breakthrough" turned out to have been



Source: Korea Overseas Information Services

furtively purchased for at least \$100 million. The inability of Presidents Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun to force the DPRK to release thousands of South Koreans believed to have been kidnapped by North Korea during and after the Korean War was another sore spot with the people.

Seven years (and nearly \$1.9 billion in aid) after his predecessor's inter-Korean summit with Kim Jong Il, President Roh Moo-hyun finally met the DPRK leader in October 2007. In a theatrical show of peace and reconciliation, the South Korean president crossed the heavily armed border on foot, followed by an entourage of 300 business, political, and cultural figures. Bearing the gifts of numerous joint projects aimed at helping the North's crippled economy, Roh Moo-hyun hoped to persuade Kim Jong Il to reduce the tensions on the peninsula and coax the so-called Hermit Kingdom out of isolation. Unlike in 2000, expectations were played down before the fall 2007 summit. Although it is still not clear whether the North will renege on its part of the agreements, the summit did achieve marginal success and is an accomplishment for Roh Moo-hyun's largely ineffectual rule. The summit resulted in a written commitment to reduce military tensions and allow freight trains into Kaesong, as well as a cooperative effort to share the disputed maritime area in the West Sea. In retrospect, though little damage resulted in way of relations with the key members of the Six-Party Talks, the solitary decision by the Roh Administration to engage in the second summit could have potentially soured relations—especially with China and the U.S., who were knee-deep in discussions with the DPRK to abandon its nuclear ambitions.

U.S.–ROK Alliance

The U.S. came to South Korea's aid during the Korean War, but the partnership between the allies has not always been unilateral and one-way. Over the years, South Korea has helped in many conflicts involving the U.S., including the Vietnam War, Afghanistan, and Iraq, where South Korean troops are the third-largest force behind the Americans and the British. Despite the continued troop deployment, the alliance has been rather tenuous of late. It was hard for Roh Moo-hyun, a man passionate about rapprochement with the North, to reconcile his reunification ideals with the hard-line treatment initially sought by George W. Bush's administration. The South Korean president entered office in 2003 after Bush's famous "Axis of Evil" speech. Later, anti-American sentiment reached a peak when two court-martialed American soldiers were declared not guilty in the deaths of two South Korean schoolgirls who were run over by their vehicle. The many different approaches used by the U.S. to deal with Kim Jong Il and the resulting adverse public sentiment caused concern about irreparable damage to the South Korea–U.S. alliance. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Han Sung-joo, Seoul's ambassador to the U.S. during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, said, "Relations of mutual trust have eroded over the years."

Nevertheless, much has been achieved despite the strained relations. The successful negotiation of the U.S.–ROK free trade agreement, which is awaiting ratification in the National Assembly and the U.S. Senate, is widely billed as Roh Moo-hyun's greatest economic achievement to date. South Korea brought home 195 army medics and engineers who had been stationed in Afghanistan, ending its five-year mission to rebuild that war-ravaged nation, but the National Assembly also passed an extension bill at the end of 2007 to station 650 South Korean troops in Iraq for another year. This was a deliberate move to strengthen ties with the U.S. despite domestic displeasure at the deployment. In a comparative survey conducted by Chosun Ilbo and Korea Gallup, anti-American sentiment had decreased substantially during the course of the Roh Moo-hyun administration. The 2007 survey found that 50.6 percent of respondents had a favorable attitude toward the U.S., compared with only 32.7 percent before Roh Moo-hyun came into office in 2002. Similarly, only 42.6 percent now harbor negative feelings, compared with the previous high of 53.7 percent.

VII. FOREIGN RELATIONS: THE LEE DYNASTY

Although relations with North Korea and the U.S. barely registered among voters in the most recent election, many political analysts believe that a pragmatic pro-business politician like Lee Myung-bak will likely to improve Seoul's strained relations with Washington. The election results also shed light on the “3-8-6” generation (working professionals in their thirties, who entered college in the 1980s, were born in the 1960s and had participated in student movements against authoritarian right-wing regimes) that vehemently opposed the U.S. in the 2002 election. Contrary to the views of many political pundits, the anti-American generation does not represent the permanent reality of South Korea. The rise of anti-American sentiment during the Roh Moo-hyun administration is widely believed to have been more of an “anti-Bush” response than a general displeasure with the U.S. and the alliance.

Given South Korea's geopolitical position amidst China, Japan, and Russia, Lee Myung-bak is eager to create stronger ties with the U.S. to help maintain its territorial integrity in the region. Armed with a more global outlook and a comprehensive foreign policy known as the “MB Doctrine,” the new president-elect has planned a series of steps to enhance relations with South Korea's immediate neighbors. In addition to closer ties with China, South Korea's largest trading partner, Lee Myung-bak has expressed a strong interest in collaborating with Russia to develop energy-rich Siberia using North Korean labor.

Preparing to take a tougher stance with the North, Lee Myung-bak declared that he would not hesitate to criticize the authoritarian government. “I assure you that there will be a change from the past government's practice of avoiding

criticism of North Korea and unilaterally flattering it,” he said in his first news conference as president-elect. “The North's human rights issue is something we cannot avoid in this regard, and North Korea should know it.” This is a clear departure from the softer approach adopted by his predecessors, who shied away from public discussion of human rights abuses to avoid harming their efforts to build relations with the DPRK.

Favoring a more reciprocal relationship, with less aid and subsidies but more mutually beneficial investments, Lee Myung-bak has pledged to raise the North's per capita income from \$500 to \$3,000 within ten years. The precondition is that the North will give up its nuclear ambitions and open up for business. Although the South Korean economy is 35 times larger than that of the DPRK, North Korea has mineral resources worth an estimated \$2.47 trillion, 24 times more than South Korea's natural reserves, according to the South Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry. To capitalize on the North's rich resources and abundant labor, Lee Myung-bak's “Denuclearization and Opening 3000” development plan intends to draw on the North's human resources to establish five free economic zones and foster 100 firms that will each export at least \$3 million worth of goods per year. The plan also seeks to finance North Korea's economic rehabilitation by raising \$40 billion. Like a true corporate raider, Lee Myung-bak has ambitious plans, but critics and political analysts alike are ambivalent about the feasibility of his plans in light of Kim Jong Il's lukewarm reception of concepts such as market openness and economic development.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The recent election in South Korea marked a dramatic and decided shift away from liberal ideology and toward economic concerns. While some view this as a turning point toward greater democratic consolidation in South Korea, others see Lee Myung-bak's election as a step backwards. Voters were more progressive in previous elections, with a more concentrated political will to shake off the often corrupt and authoritarian rule of the 1970s and 1980s by making a clean break with the old ties among the military, business, and government. Even though the new president-elect won by an overwhelming majority, his mandate might not be as strong as his victory indicates, because the victory has been partially attributed to voters' disappointment with liberal rule and the perception that the economy is in trouble. However, it is important to note that both of Lee Myung-bak's predecessors took office in periods of even greater economic difficulty. Kim Dae-jung was elected a month after South Korea's economy nearly collapsed from a rapidly devalued won and the weight of overinvestment by big business and financial institutions. Roh Moo-hyun took over in 2003 just as the country experienced a sharp slowdown in growth because of mounting household credit woes and soaring oil prices before the Iraq war.

Lee Myung-bak also must contend with internal rifts in his party, most notably between himself and former party president Park Guen-hye, the daughter of the former military dictator Park Chung-hee. The president-elect's policy agenda might be affected if he cannot reach an amicable working relationship with Park, who has voiced her intention to run for president in five years and wants a hand in picking the party's candidates for parliamentary elections in April 2008. A conflict within the GNP will make it harder for Lee Myung-bak to get his proposals passed in parliament.

Ultimately, for all his vision and grandiose plans for South Korea, Lee Myung-bak must answer to his electoral base—people who are looking for solutions to rising property prices, improvements to the social security system, and economic prosperity. Failure to deliver on his promises of robust growth and a corruption-free administration in the next five years will likely generate greater political apathy and create a backlash so drastic that could potentially damage South Korea's democratic development in the long run.

Timeline of the Sixth Republic (1987–now)

- 1987: President Chun Doo-hwan pushed out of office by student unrest and international pressure. Roh Tae-woo succeeds Chun, grants greater degree of political liberalization and launches anti-corruption drive.
- 1993: President Roh succeeded by Kim Young-sam, a former opponent of the regime and becomes the first civilian president.
- 1998: Kim Dae-jung sworn in as president and pursues “Sunshine Policy” of offering unconditional economic and humanitarian aid to North Korea.
- 2000 June: Inaugural summit in Pyongyang between Kim Jong Il and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung.
- 2002 December: Roh Moo-hyun wins election in a closely fought battle.
- 2004 February: Parliament approves controversial dispatch of 3,000 troops to Iraq.
- 2004 March-May: President Roh Moo-hyun suspended after parliament votes to impeach him over breach of election rules and for incompetence. In May, the Constitutional Court overturns the move and President Roh is reinstated.
- 2004 June: United States proposes to cut its troop presence by a third. Opposition raises security fears over the plan.
- 2006 February: South Korea and the United States launch talks on a free trade agreement, the largest free trade deal involving the United States in Asia.
- 2006 November: Government approves one-year extension of military mission in Iraq.
- 2007 April: South Korea and the United States agree on a free-trade deal after ten months of talks.
- 2007 October: Second Inter-Korean Summit, between Roh Moo-hyun and Kim Jong Il.
- 2007 November: Prime ministers from North and South Korea meet for the first time in 15 years.
- 2007 December: Lee Myung-bak claims victory in presidential elections.

Source: BBC News