



Korea: UP-lifting Elections? by Ralph A. Cossa

South Koreans go to the polls on Thursday (April 15) to elect a new National Assembly but much, much more than that now appears at stake since last month's impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun, ostensibly because of his statement of support for one of the contesting parties. The president's support for the upstart Uri Party (UP) over the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) and the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) – nominally his own party, since he ran on the MDP ticket – caused the opposition to unite and present Roh with an ultimatum in early March: either apologize for his comments – which were judged to be illegal but only a minor infraction of ROK election laws – or face impeachment.

Roh could have defused the crisis by acknowledging his mistake but decided instead to call the opposition's bluff. After internationally broadcast fisticuffs between his supporters and detractors on the floor of the National Assembly, Roh was impeached by a vote of 193 to 2 (Uri Party members walked out before the vote), on the grounds of election law violations, corruption, and incompetence. Winston Churchill once said that "democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those others that have been tried." Koreans seem intent on demonstrating the irony in these words.

Roh's fate now lies in the hands of a Constitutional Court, where within 180 days (and more likely by the end of April) six of nine members must vote to support the impeachment or President Roh returns to the Blue House after a paid vacation with full room and board. While the Court is independent, most analysts believe that its members will be influenced by the public sentiments expressed in the ballot boxes.

Public opinion is currently running about 70-30 against impeachment and the Uri Party is expected to gain a big boost as a result of the political showdown. Some have suggested that Roh, ever the brilliant political tactician, actually orchestrated the whole crisis to lift the UP up. Whether by design or default, that is what has happened. While inconceivable at the beginning of the year, it now appears Uri could become the largest (and perhaps even the majority) party in the National Assembly after the April 15 election, giving Roh the foundation he has thus far lacked to pursue his political agenda . . . assuming, of course – as almost everyone does – that the impeachment charges do not stand.

The implications of all this for ROK-U.S. and South-North relations are less than clear but most UP members are considerably more sympathetic and tolerant of North Korea than they appear to be toward Washington. Without the checks and balances provided by a more conservative National Assembly, it is difficult to predict in which direction Roh will choose to take either relationship. Meanwhile, in the very-capable hands of Prime Minister and now acting-President

Goh Kun, the country remains safe and secure and perhaps more politically stable than at any time since Roh's election, which could revive calls for a less-powerful presidency or even for a parliamentary system somewhere down the line.

President Bush has stated that it is U.S. policy to promote democracy everywhere. This brings to mind yet another old saying (usually attributed to Chinese fortune cookies): "Be careful what you wish for because you might get it."

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