

South Korea's Roh Moo-hyun: An Impossible Idealist

by Scott Snyder

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The death of Roh Moo-hyun, the 16th president of the Republic of Korea (2003-2008), is a huge shock to South Korea's political world. A human rights lawyer with no college degree, Roh campaigned to revolutionize Korean politics and society by promoting clean politics, fighting corruption, and challenging personal and elite ties as the basis for advancement in Korean society. His political idealism was both profoundly attractive and disappointing to the South Korean public since he ultimately became a victim of the flaws in the Korean system he had set out to overcome. His apparent suicide following revelations of personal corruption is a stunning political and personal tragedy, with mixed reverberations for Korean politics.

Roh's appeal and the seeds of his personal and political demise lay in his impossible idealism. The overwhelming success of his populist, underdog 2002 presidential campaign – driven primarily by an anti-corruption agenda although it was often characterized as anti-American – was electrifying and surprising to no one more than Roh himself. He and his supporters were true believers in the need for reform of South Korean politics and society, but they ultimately could not separate themselves from the human failings of a society of which they were a part.

Roh's idealism was primarily attractive to a younger generation of activists who cut their political teeth on pro-democracy protests of the 1980s. But their quest for a more perfect Korean society, in which merit and egalitarianism would trump personal connections and hierarchy, proved to be an impossible dream, at least for now.

As president, Roh became the representative of the elite and the pinnacle of the South Korean political hierarchy. This role conflicted with his idealistic crusade against South Korea's political system, and he never seemed to reconcile himself with his role as president. Roh proved to be a high-maintenance president: he threatened to resign when facing threats from the conservative establishment and weathered an impeachment motion by his political enemies early in his term.

In the world of international diplomacy and high politics, he beamed like a child visiting Disneyworld for the first time, a marked contrast with his serious and stately predecessor Kim Dae-jung. His mediocre executive performance and focus on revolutionizing Korean politics rather than managing the national agenda led to widespread public disillusionment by the end of his term.

The high idealism of Roh's political agenda set an impossible standard that crumbled in the face of political reality. His core supporters saw themselves as the true harbingers of Korean democracy, brushing aside the evolutionary accomplishments of pro-democracy predecessors, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae-jung. A high moment of his presidency was a public debate with the nation's senior prosecutors in which he challenged a bureaucratic system based on seniority.

Roh's greatest accomplishments were acts of omission rather than acts of commission. The Blue House's hands-off policy during a corruption investigation of his political allies during his term in office was a watershed in Korean politics. And that policy was enforced despite the fact that the corruption uncovered in connection with his campaign proved to be an order of magnitude less than that of his main opponent, Lee Hoi-chang. The \$6 million his family is alleged to have received as he left the presidency was a pittance compared to the hundreds of millions of dollars his predecessors received while in office.

But the idealism that galvanized Roh's unlikely rise proved to be his undoing. When corruption allegations became public earlier this year, Roh wrote on his website that "From now on, the name Roh cannot be a symbol of the values you pursue. I'm no longer qualified to speak about democracy and justice . . . You should abandon me." His suicide note stated that "the suffering caused by me is too great to too many people. The suffering in store for the future is too much to bear. The remainder of my life will only be a burden to others." Ultimately, Roh's idealism could not be reconciled with the realities of political life in South Korea.

The outpouring of mourning led by Roh's supporters may pose a political challenge to the administration of Lee Myung-bak, which has found itself vulnerable to public criticism for reinforcing elitism and deepening longstanding Korean social and political divisions. Just as Lee benefited from Roh's perceived failures during the 2007 election campaign, he may now be more vulnerable to criticism as a result of Roh's demise. There are internet rumors that Roh's prosecution for corruption was persecution by the Lee administration against Roh and his closest supporters.

The longer-term question is what is the impact of Roh's death and his deeply conflicted legacy as a symbol of idealism on Korean politics. Although Korean progressives are in deep disarray, public disillusionment with the political status quo could yet launch a new generation of idealistic Korean political reformers. Those reformers will want to combine idealism with a dose of pragmatism and competency if they are to realize Roh's impossible dreams.