

South Korean election dominated by debate over US alliance

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South Koreans cast their vote today in a presidential poll that has been dominated by growing public antagonism toward Washington. While debate has focused on the presence of 37,000 US troops in South Korea, there are clearly broader concerns about Bush administration's aggressive foreign policies, in particular, its belligerent stance on North Korea and the dangers of war.

Last weekend, more than 50,000 people took part in a protest in the capital Seoul against the acquittal of two US soldiers over the deaths of two schoolgirls. The servicemen, charged with negligent homicide after their armoured vehicle crushed the girls in June, were found not guilty by a US court-martial last month. The protesters were demanding a public apology from Bush, a retrial and changes to the country's Status of Forces Agreement with the US.

The demonstrations have continued for weeks and, according to a number of reports, have drawn in broad layers of people, including shopkeepers, taxi drivers, white-collar workers and housewives. While many of those taking part stopped short of demanding the withdrawal of US troops, they were nevertheless critical of the US presence. "We are not a colony of the United States, and we don't want to be treated that way. We want them to stay but they must treat us as equal partners," a Seoul coffee vendor told the press.

Hostility over the incident has been so widespread that conservative candidate Lee Hoi-chang felt compelled to put in an appearance at the ongoing vigil outside the US embassy in Seoul. He also signed a petition calling for changes to the Status of Forces Agreement, which currently allows US servicemen to be tried by court-martial, rather than in a Korean court. Lee is from the Grand National Party, which has close associations with the rightwing, US-backed military regimes that dominated South Korea until the late 1980s.

His main opponent, Roh Moo-hyun from the Millennium Democratic Party of current president Kim Dae-jung, has exploited anger over the incident and fears generated by rising tensions between the US and North Korea to salvage his floundering campaign. Lee was able to use corruption proceedings against Kim's sons to bolster his standing in the polls. Moreover, among layers of workers who had voted for Kim in 1997, there is deep disaffection over his

administration's imposition of IMF restructuring demands, which have resulted in widespread retrenchments and falling living standards.

Since October, however, when North Korea admitted to operating a uranium enrichment program in breach of international agreements, attention has focused on the dangers of military conflict. The Bush administration, having previously branded Pyongyang as part of an "axis of evil," has cut off oil supplies and aid to North Korea and demanded that it dismantle its nuclear programs. While the Bush administration insists that it will use diplomatic means to achieve its goal, its invasion of Afghanistan and the impending war against Iraq leave little doubt that military means could be used in the future. Any US strike against North Korean nuclear facilities threatens to trigger a conflagration on the Korean peninsula as a whole.

Tensions went up another notch last week when Pyongyang announced that it intended to restart a nuclear reactor that was mothballed under an agreement signed with Washington in 1994. North Korea agreed to shut the reactor and put its spent fuel rods under International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) control in return for supplies of fuel oil and a promise to build replacement lightwater reactors. Eight years later, the lightwater reactor construction has barely started. North Korean officials have now demanded that the IAEA remove the seals on the fuel rods and cameras inside its nuclear facilities.

Lee has strongly defended the Bush administration and accused Kim Dae-jung of compromising the country's security. Under Kim's "sunshine policy," South Korea's stance towards Pyongyang shifted from confrontation to providing economic aid as a means of opening up North Korea to investment and lessening military tensions. Lee has branded the strategy a failure, declaring: "For the last five years, we have been catering to North Korea, being led around by our noses by Pyongyang."

His opponent Roh has backed the "sunshine policy" and said he will continue to provide aid to North Korea, despite pressure from Washington not to do so. In the course of the campaign, he pointed out that South Korea was not even informed in 1993 when the Clinton administration went to the brink of war against North Korea prior to the signing of the 1994 agreement. "We don't want to become spectators again," he said. "In the

old days, we were not able to solve our problems ourselves. Now it is different.”

There is no doubt which candidate Washington wants to win the election. Shortly after coming to office, Bush abandoned the high-level negotiations begun by the previous Clinton administration with Pyongyang. During Kim’s visit to the US last year, Bush humiliated the South Korean president by questioning the value of any agreement with North Korea. By ratcheting up the pressure on Pyongyang, the US has effectively scuttled the “sunshine policy” and strengthened the hand of Kim’s political opponents.

Significantly, in the course of the election campaign, the Bush administration deliberately played down the threat of any US military strike on North Korea. Of course, Washington’s overriding consideration is to prevent any conflict with North Korea from complicating US preparations for launching war against Iraq. An important secondary factor, however, is the concern that hostility to Washington may result in the defeat of Lee, Bush’s preferred candidate. Last Friday Bush rang Kim Dae-jung to offer an apology over the acquittal of the two US soldiers and, over the weekend, US Secretary of State Colin Powell pointedly declared that the US had no intention of attacking North Korea.

The defensive reaction of the Bush administration and its South Korean allies indicates the strength of public sentiment. A decade ago, Roh would have been denounced as a subversive, or worse, for his rather mealy-mouthed criticisms of US policy. But fears of another war on the Korean peninsula have provoked deep suspicion over Washington’s actions. News last week that US and Spanish warships had seized a North Korean freighter loaded with Scud missiles bound for Yemen was greeted with cries that Washington had timed the exercise to bolster Lee’s campaign.

Commenting on the current political climate, the conservative *Chosun Ilbo* declared that “a poisonous atmosphere has been spreading like a fad throughout the base of the country’s society”. The remarks reflect concerns in ruling circles in Seoul that the hostility to the Bush administration could endanger South Korea’s economic and strategic relations with the US.

On Tuesday, major employer groups, including the Korean Chamber of Commerce and the Federation of Korean Industries, warned that an anti-US campaign could prompt a boycott of Korean goods in the US and endanger the country’s \$8.9 billion surplus. President Kim joined the business groups in insisting that US forces had to remain in South Korea. “If the US troops left, foreign investments are feared to follow,” he said.

Hostility against the US military has fed into existing anger among working people over the impact of IMF policies, which are widely seen as imposed by Washington. These sentiments have been exploited by sections of the South Korean trade union bureaucracy. They have deliberately promoted a reactionary anti-Americanism, which identifies the American

working class with the policies of the ruling elite, as a means of deflecting attention from their own role in enforcing Kim’s policies.

Unemployment has risen rapidly after Kim ended the previous policy of lifelong employment, allowing corporations to slash their workforces. Workers in public enterprises have also lost their jobs as a result of government restructuring and privatisation programs. Young people have been particularly hard hit. According to a recent survey, one in four people between 15 and 29 is jobless. A total of 1,329,000 young people are unemployed, of whom 21 percent are university graduates.

Neither candidate has any solution to the country’s social crisis. Both support the program of market restructuring demands that will deepen the divide between rich and poor. Lee has demanded tough action against so-called illegal strikes. Roh, who has not opposed Kim’s ruthless crackdown on striking workers, has played on his own record as a union lawyer and promises of a welfare safety net to appeal to disaffected working class voters.

The outcome of the election appears to be close. Opinion polling is not permitted during the formal election campaign but the most recent results indicated that Roh had a narrow lead over Lee. Roh may lose votes to Kwon Young Ghil, a former trade union bureaucrat with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), who is standing as the candidate for the Democratic Labor Party.

Roh is also expected to be hit by a last minute disendorsement by Chung Mong Joon, a son of the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate. Chung made his own presidential bid based on his reputation as the organiser of the recent soccer World Cup and the South Korean team’s success. He pulled out to throw his weight behind Roh but withdrew his support on Wednesday and criticised Roh’s policy towards North Korea.

The overriding factor, however, is the volatility of the electorate. Broad layers of voters remain disaffected with the political establishment as a whole. Just 24 hours prior to the opening of the polls, one report indicated that as many as 20 percent of voters remain undecided.



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