

South Korean election reveals deep-seated hostility to Washington

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The results of the presidential election on December 19 has confirmed a growing resentment in South Korea over Washington's aggressive stance toward North Korea and fears of military conflict on the peninsula.

Millennium Democratic Party candidate Roh Moo-hyun, who called for continued dialogue with North Korea and a revision of the military alliance with the US, defeated his rightwing opponent Lee Hoi-chang by a margin of 48.9 percent to 46.6 percent. Roh, who even a month ago appeared to facing an impossible task, polled strongly among young people, winning 62 percent of the under-30's vote.

Roh based his campaign on continuing the "sunshine policy" of current president Kim Dae-jung that is aimed at restoring links between the two Koreas and opening up the North as a cheap labour platform for foreign investors. While extremely cautious in his statements on the US alliance, he nevertheless declared: "I don't have any anti-American sentiment, but I won't kowtow to the Americans, either."

Tensions on the Korean peninsula have escalated since October when, forced into a corner by Washington, Pyongyang admitted to establishing a secret uranium enrichment program. The Bush administration responded by cutting off supplies of fuel oil, provided as part of a 1994 deal under which North Korea agreed to shut down its existing nuclear reactors. Pyongyang has since announced that it will restart the reactors and has demanded access to spent fuel rods that were sealed as part of the deal.

According to conventional electoral wisdom, the conservative Lee, whose Grand National Party (GNP) has close ties with previous US-backed military regimes, should have been the beneficiary of the confrontation between the US and North Korea. Convinced that he could win by relying on an anti-communist scare campaign, Lee denounced the "sunshine policy" as a failure, aligned himself closely with Washington and insisted that North Korea dismantle its nuclear program before any talks could take place.

Instead, however, the tide flowed in the opposite direction. Ordinary South Koreans are justifiably concerned that the Bush administration, which has branded North Korea as part of an "axis of evil" along with Iraq, will use Pyongyang's nuclear program as the pretext for launching military strikes. Summing up the mood, one young voter commented to the media: "Bush is a trigger-happy man. We need a leader who can say no when we think we should say no. Our country has been too subservient to the United States."

Fears of a possible military conflict went hand in hand with resentment over America's continued military presence in South Korea. Last month a US court martial acquitted two US soldiers whose armoured vehicle ran over and killed two South Korean schoolgirls earlier in the year. The decision provoked outrage, as well as substantial protests demanding the revision of the country's Status of Forces Agreement with the US to allow American military personnel to be tried in South Korean courts. Such was the sentiment that the conservative Lee was compelled to put in an appearance at the rallies.

Roh, who capitalised on the anger to win the vote, rapidly sought to assure Washington, as soon as the election was over, that there would be no fundamental shift in South Korean-US relations. In the course of the campaign, he repeatedly disowned his support in the 1980s for the withdrawal of the 37,000 US troops stationed in South Korea. Yesterday, following the poll result, Roh declared his desire to go to Washington to forge a "mature" relationship with the US. "I will maintain a full cooperation with the United States to resolve North Korea's nuclear issue and we [South Korea] would play a leading role [in doing so]," he said.

Roh was not Washington's preferred choice. But, in an effort to placate anti-US sentiment in South Korea, the Bush administration moved quickly to congratulate him and invite him to Washington for talks at the White House. US Assistant Secretary of State James Kelly stated that Roh's win was the opportunity "to build an even stronger relationship between our two countries". Asked about the

anti-US tone to Roh's campaign, Kelly declared that some statements made "in the heat of the campaign" might not pan out.

While the Bush administration is no doubt looking to pressure Roh into line and Roh is more than willing to accommodate, the logic of the situation may dictate otherwise. The popular hostility to Washington's policies will be given further impetus if, as appears more and more certain, the US launches war against Iraq. Moreover, sections of the South Korean corporate elite, who see the "sunshine policy" as a means for cashing in on North Korea's cheap labour and raw materials, are at odds with the Bush administration's bellicose stance towards Pyongyang. Having campaigned on asserting South Korea's independence, no matter how tentatively, Roh may be driven to take a tougher stance than he intended, particularly if support for his administration starts to slip.

The other significant feature of the election result was the lowest-ever voter turnout—just 70.2 percent, down by over 10 percentage points from the 1997 presidential election.

Some commentators have sought to blame the last minute withdrawal of support for Roh by Chung Mong-joon, son of the founder of the Hyundai conglomerate, who gained a certain popularity because of his role in promoting the recent soccer World Cup in South Korea. Chung withdrew his own candidacy in late November and formed an alliance with Roh to defeat the conservative Lee. Until then, Roh had been trailing in the polls, with only 20 percent of the vote. At the eleventh hour, however, Chung abruptly broke the arrangement, claiming a remark by Roh on Wednesday called the US alliance into question.

To attribute the low vote simply to the Chung factor, however, is to ignore the widespread disaffection within the working class towards the entire political establishment. Roh has pledged to continue the economic restructuring measures implemented by Kim Dae-jung over the last five years at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. In 1998, Kim, with the backing of the trade unions, amended the country's labour laws to undermine the system of lifelong employment in force in larger corporations. As a result, unemployment rates climbed, especially among young people.

Kim's restructuring policies have resulted in bitter conflicts, which the administration has ruthlessly suppressed. In April 2001, for instance, the government sent hundreds of heavily-armed riot police to smash an occupation of 350 laid-off Daewoo workers—43 of whom had to be hospitalised after being severely kicked and beaten. The police action provoked such an outburst of public anger that the national police chief was forced to make a humiliating apology.

A further indication of the hostility to the two major

parties is the increased vote for Democratic Labor Party candidate Kwon Young-ghil, who won nearly 4 percent, up from 1.2 percent at the 1997 election. In the industrial city of Ulsan, Kwon, a former leader of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), received 11.4 percent of the vote. Despite the fact that the KCTU was instrumental in allowing the 1998 changes to the labour laws, Kwon campaigned for amendments to make sackings more difficult.

In the course of the presidential campaign, Roh, who built a reputation as a "pro-labour" lawyer, promised to introduce even greater "flexibility" into the labour market. Despite the changes to the labour laws made by Kim, business leaders have complained about restrictions on their ability to sack workers. Speaking after his win, Roh declared: "I think there remain some rigid factors in the labour market. I will try to remove any unreasonable hurdles."

He is already under pressure from big business to cut labour costs and boost the country's competitiveness. The Korea Chamber of Commerce and Industry declared: "Corporate Korea now stands at a momentous crossroads, particularly in the face of serious economic challenges from China. Without the creation of a new growth momentum, Korea could be overtaken by China in key industrial sectors in less than five years. Thus, the new president is required to put his top priority on strengthening industrial competitiveness and an economic rebound."

At the same time, Roh confronts a hostile parliament. In the 2000 elections, the right-wing GNP was able to capitalise on the hostility to the Kim Dae-jung administration and currently holds a majority of 150 in the 272-seat National Assembly. Roh's own Millennium Democratic Party has only 102 seats. As a result, the new president-elect will be compelled to reach an agreement with the GNP to enable parliament to approve the appointment of a prime minister.

While Roh is not due to be sworn in as president until February, his honeymoon is not likely to last long. He will rapidly come under pressure from business and a conservative parliament to make further inroads into the social position of the working class. At the same time, he will be treading a fine line with Washington as the already tense situation on the Korean peninsula continues to deteriorate.



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