

South Korean voters reject right-wing establishment parties

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South Korea's general election on Thursday produced a major political upheaval. Voters gave a parliamentary majority to the Uri Party, which was formed less than six months ago, and delivered a stinging rebuff to the established parties—the right-wing Grand National Party (GNP) and the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) of former president Kim Dae-jung.

The Uri Party is closely aligned to President Roh Moo-hyun, who was formally impeached by the National Assembly on March 12 for alleged breaches of the electoral law, corruption and administrative incompetence. In moving against Roh, the GNP and MDP calculated that there would be little public reaction. But the plan backfired badly, provoking widespread indignation and anger against what was widely viewed as a parliamentary coup against Roh by the political establishment.

According to polls prior to the election, some 70 percent of people opposed the impeachment. Over the past month, the GNP and MDP have been scrambling to shore up their disintegrating support. MDP election committee chief Choo Mi-ae made a series of grovelling apologies for his party's role in the impeachment. The GNP installed Park Geun-hye, the daughter of former military dictator Park Chun-hee, as its leader in a bid to give the party a face-lift.

None of this stopped the Uri Party from trebling its seats in the 299-seat National Assembly from 49 to 152. The GNP's campaign appears to have had some effect in slowing its slide, particularly in the party's base in the south-east. The number of GNP seats fell nevertheless from 137 to 121. The MDP, however suffered a devastating rout—collapsing from 61 seats to 9. The MDP was pushed into fourth position in the assembly by the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which

is closely aligned to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The DLP gained a 10-seat foothold in parliament for the first time.

Much has been made in media commentary about the “generation gap” in the election, with younger voters supporting the Uri Party and the older generation backing the GNP. While age may be an element of the voting pattern, more fundamental underlying issues are at stake.

Roh won the December 2002 presidential election, by appealing to a growing anti-American sentiment provoked, in particular, by the Bush administration's aggressive stance toward North Korea and fears of military conflict. Roh, who stood under the MDP banner, was a supporter of the so-called sunshine policy elaborated by Kim Dae-jung, which aimed at opening up North Korea to investment and easing tensions on the Korean peninsula.

The GNP never accepted the outcome of the poll and used its dominance in the parliament to effectively stymie Roh's initiatives and undermine his credibility. The GNP, which has close ties to the previous US-backed military dictatorships, has always opposed the “sunshine policy” and supported Washington's bellicose stance toward Pyongyang. Embroiled in corruption allegations, Roh also faced divisions with the MDP over his “liberal” orientation, leading to an eventual split. The Uri Party was officially launched last November.

The Uri Party is backed by significant sections of the ruling elite, who regard it as a vehicle to push ahead with economic restructuring and challenge the entrenched conglomerates or *chaebols*, which dominate much of the economy and are closely linked to the GNP. In the course of the election campaign, Uri Party parliamentary leader Kim Keun-tae told the London-

based *Financial Times*: “We would create an atmosphere that will improve economic competitiveness and increase investment through greater transparency.”

Like his predecessor Kim Dae-jung, Roh continued to implement so-called economic reforms, initiating further privatisation and enforcing harsh labour laws. Dissatisfaction with Roh’s failure to keep his promises to help working people and the poor was compounded by his decision to dispatch 3,600 South Korean troops to Iraq in support of the US occupation. Having appealed to voters on the basis of taking a more independent stance toward the US, Roh bowed to pressure from Washington in return for vague promises that the Bush administration would soften its stance on North Korea.

Prior to his impeachment, Roh’s standing in the opinion polls had slid from a high of 90 percent after his election to just 30 percent. Growing hostility to Roh, however, did not signify support for the GNP and MDP. In fact, the impeachment rapidly galvanised support for the Uri Party as voters reacted to the prospect that the right-wing pro-US GNP would take the presidency through this underhanded manoeuvre.

While the Uri Party now has a parliamentary majority, the election has not resolved the sharp divisions in the country’s ruling elites. These tensions are certain to be exacerbated by the Bush administration’s militarist policies in North East Asia and the Middle East. US Vice-President Richard Cheney was in Seoul yesterday as part of a regional tour to push for a more aggressive approach toward North Korea and to shore up support for the US-led occupation of Iraq.

The popular uprising in Iraq against the US presence, along with kidnapping and subsequent release of nine South Koreans in Iraq, has further fuelled opposition to the sending of more South Korean troops. Some 600 engineers and medics are already in the country with another 3,000 due to be dispatched in the coming months. Several hundred people gathered in central Seoul on Thursday to protest against the Cheney visit and demand he “go home”.

Uri Party chief Chung Dong-young reaffirmed last week that the South Korean troops will be sent to Iraq. A military survey team was due to leave yesterday to survey possible sites for a military base in northern

Iraq. But the decision will undoubtedly create tensions inside the loosely unified Uri Party, particularly as other parties are already calling the troop dispatch into question. DLP leader Kwon Young-ghil has announced his intention to submit a bill to the assembly to overturn the sending of troops.

Roh’s own future is still in question. While Roh is still formally the country’s president, the prime minister is acting in his place pending the outcome of a decision on the impeachment in the constitutional court. The election outcome puts pressure on the court to rule in Roh’s favour, but by no means ensures that the conservative nine-judge panel will do so. The Uri Party and DLP have called on the GNP to agree to rescind the impeachment vote in parliament. At this stage, however, GNP leaders have rejected the proposal.

Whatever the outcome, the political turmoil in South Korea is likely to continue. The Uri Party is pledged to press ahead with policies at home and abroad that will alienate its own base of support and open up splits in its ranks. At the same time, while it has suffered a setback, the GNP is not reconciled to Roh or his policies and will exploit any opportunity to undermine the new administration.



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