

South Korean court overturns presidential impeachment

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South Korea's Constitutional Court last Friday overturned the impeachment of President Roh Moo Hyun by the country's National Assembly in March. While the court decision was widely expected, it confirms the setback suffered by the right-wing parties that sought to oust the president. Not only has Roh been restored to office but the pro-Roh Uri Party has gained control of the National Assembly, following a voter backlash against the impeachment in general elections last month.

In its ruling, the nine-member court obliquely referred to the popular sentiment, declaring: "It cannot be said that he [Roh] lost the people's trust to a degree that we should take his office away." The court rejected two of the three grounds for impeachment—corruption and economic mismanagement—and declared that the third charge of contravening electoral laws, while proven, was insufficient to warrant the president's removal.

The conservative Grand National Party (GNP) and the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) moved the impeachment motion on March 12 amid sliding support for Roh after a series of corruption scandals, accompanied by rising opposition to his economic policies as well as the decision to send South Korean troops to Iraq.

The pretext was an innocuous remark by Roh to the media in February that he intended to support the Uri Party in the upcoming elections. South Korean electoral law bars state officials, including the president, from publicly supporting political parties. The allegations of corruption and incompetence were added later.

Amid chaotic scenes in parliament, the GNP and MDP rammed through the impeachment motion, the first in South Korea's history. After attempting to physically prevent a vote, Uri Party MPs stormed out of

the session.

The move backfired badly, however. Hostility to Roh did not translate into support for the opposition parties. The impeachment was widely regarded as a parliamentary putsch by the conservative political establishment that has dominated the country since the Korean War. According to opinion polls, some 70 percent of voters were opposed to the ouster.

In the April 15 elections, the Uri Party, which was only formed last November in a break from the MDP, trebled its seats and obtained a slender parliamentary majority. While the GNP held onto most of its seats, the MDP was virtually obliterated and now has only nine seats in the assembly. The leftist Democratic Labor Party, affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), won 10 seats for the first time.

By restoring Roh to power, the Constitutional Court has ended what threatened to become a protracted political and constitutional standoff and spiral out of control. The concern in ruling circles was that ordinary working people had already begun to intervene in the political process and express their opposition to the anti-democratic methods of the established political parties.

In the wake of the court decision, the South Korean media appealed for Roh to adopt a more conciliatory approach to the opposition. *JoongAng Ilbo* urged Roh to "show self-reflection and modesty" and "respect the Assembly and the opposition, and implement politics of co-existence". The *Korean Herald* advised: "What he [Roh] needs to do now is to promote integration and harmony in a society that has been ripped apart by different ideologies, regions, generations and classes."

Roh has heeded the call. On Saturday, he issued an abject apology, declaring that from now on he would take a backseat in politics and concentrate on tackling the country's economic problems. Standing in drizzling

rain outside the presidential palace, he said: “Once again I take this opportunity to apologise, deeply apologise, to the people... Even though the impeachment was overturned it does not mean I have escaped political and moral responsibility.”

Whether this show of contrition is enough to appease those who were after Roh’s political head is yet to be seen. While no minority judgement was issued, the court decision was not unanimous, pointing to deep divisions in the country’s ruling elite, which have been exacerbated by the Bush administration’s aggressive stance toward North Korea.

Washington’s actions have effectively undermined the so-called Sunshine policy of the previous president Kim Dae Jung, which was aimed at enticing Pyongyang to open up the country to foreign investment with offers of aid and assistance. Roh, a supporter of the Sunshine policy, unexpectedly won the December 2002 presidential election by exploiting the widespread fears of a war, and resentment over the continued presence of US troops on South Korean soil.

But having come to office, Roh confronted a hostile assembly where the GNP, the political heir of the country’s previous pro-US military dictatorships, held a dominant position. The GNP supports the Bush administration’s basic strategy of isolating the Stalinist regime in Pyongyang in an effort to precipitate its economic and political collapse. The most right-wing elements of the GNP regard the Sunshine policy and Roh’s timid attempts to take a more independent stance from Washington as tantamount to treason.

Last year, Roh bowed to pressure from Washington and agreed to dispatch 3,600 troops to assist the US-led occupation of Iraq in return for vague promises that the US would soften its stance on North Korea. However, the decision provoked continuing popular opposition. Just last Friday, antiwar protestors held a small rally near the US embassy in Seoul calling on the government to reverse its decision. Around 600 military engineers and medics are already in Iraq and the remaining 3,000 troops are due to leave in coming months.

The issue threatens to open up divisions in the disparate ranks of the Uri Party. Roh, with the support of the GNP, has repeatedly insisted that the deployment will go ahead despite growing protests. Last Tuesday, however, Uri Party members chose Chun Jung-bae, as

their assembly leader. Chun has previously floated the idea of providing money rather than troops for Iraq.

The Democratic Labor Party is openly calling for a new assembly vote to block the dispatch of troops to Iraq. It has also called for the withdrawal of all US troops from South Korea and the repeal of the country’s draconian National Security Law, which formally designates North Korea as an enemy and outlaws “communist” activities.

Support for Roh and the Uri Party will also fade as the administration presses ahead with economic restructuring measures designed to boost the economy. Last year, the growth rate fell to 2.9 percent, from 6.3 percent in 2002. While the economy is predicted to grow by 5 percent this year, it is highly vulnerable to rising oil prices and any slowdown, particularly in the Chinese and US economies.

Roh’s plans for economic reform will produce opposition on two fronts. Efforts to loosen the grip of the country’s large conglomerates, or chaebol, will be resisted by powerful vested interests closely aligned to the GNP. At the same time, further restructuring and privatisation will only add to the rising levels of unemployment and poverty, intensifying the anger and hostility among ordinary working people.

Far from ending the country’s political crisis, the decision of the Constitutional Court to reinstate Roh has simply set the stage for further instability.



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