

The death of former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun

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On May 23, Roh Moo-hyun, the former president of South Korea, fell to his death from a cliff near his retirement home in Bongha Village in Gimhae, South Gyeongsang Province, leaving a brief note on his computer. The apparent suicide came amid an aggressive government probe and conservative media circus over bribery allegations against Roh, his wife, children, relatives, and key aides.

Roh and his family were accused of receiving \$6.4 million from longtime supporter and friend Park Yeon-cha, CEO of the shoe manufacturer Taekwang Industry. Roh, who said he learned of the transaction only after his presidency, insisted the money was not a bribe. With his death, the probe was closed, and Prosecutor General Lim Chae-jin, taking responsibility for the investigation, resigned on June 3.

Three weeks before his death, Roh was summoned to the Supreme Prosecutor's Office in Seoul on April 30, questioned for more than 10 hours until after midnight, and humiliated on national television. Whether or not an arrest warrant would be sought was to be determined in early June. Roh's predecessor, ex-president Kim Dae-jung, observed: "I believe Roh could not bear the anxiety and pressure caused by the daily suspicious allegations against his whole family leaked by the prosecutors to the media."

Roh himself had censured the conservative press in 2007, saying, "Former presidents Kim Young-sam and Kim Dae-jung were slain by the press near the end of their terms. I will not leave Cheong Wa Dae [the presidential residence] in a body bag, but on my feet." Roh, who had campaigned for the presidency on an anti-corruption platform, apparently took his life out of shame.

That is suggested by the last post on his website on April 22: "You should now discard me," he wrote. "I no longer symbolize the values you pursue. I am no longer qualified to speak for such things as democracy, progressiveness and justice." He told reporters before departing for the Prosecutor's Office: "I am deeply ashamed before my fellow citizens. I am sorry to have disappointed you."

The *International Herald Tribune* noted on May 29: "Since his suicide, [Roh's] public image has transformed into that of an honorable man who chose suicide to defend his reputation; a heroic father, husband or boss who sacrificed his life to shield his wife, children and aides from prosecution; or the victim of a politically motivated investigation masterminded by political enemies."

Roh's death, seven days of mourning, pervasive media coverage, a state "people's funeral," and a posthumous medal aroused emotional outpourings from millions across South Korea. But that did not mean

support for Roh or his pro-market policies, which caused profound disillusionment during his tenure from 2003 to 2008. As one Seoul university student explained: "People are angry with Lee Myung-bak [the current right-wing president]. That is why they are sad for Roh Moo-hyun."

When a makeshift memorial altar for Roh appeared in front of Deoksugung Palace in Seoul, attracting some 3,000 people, then tens of thousands daily, the Lee administration feared a repeat of the mass anti-government protests of May to July 2008. More than 70,000 police were dispatched, and Seoul Plaza was barricaded with police buses. Despite the absence of large-scale demonstrations, fights between protestors and police occurred around makeshift altars in the city, one lasting for two hours on May 24. The altars had, in some cases, become sites for signature campaigns to impeach Lee.

The day Roh died, supporters in his native Bongha Village trampled and burned Lee's mourning wreaths and collected petitions for his impeachment. A netizen posted the message, "President Lee Myung-bak, are you satisfied now?" on the Cheong Wa Dae website. During Roh's funeral service at Gyeongbok Palace in Seoul on May 29, leaflets in yellow (Roh's campaign color) read, "Lee Myung-bak apologize!" with people shouting, "Apologize for political murder!" and "Down with Lee Myung-bak!"

Similarly, when Lee and his wife approached Roh's altar at the funeral, opposition lawmakers heckled him, and Democratic Party (DP) lawmaker Baek Won-woo screamed, "President Lee Myung-bak, apologize!" and "This is political revenge, a political murder!" before he was seized by security guards. The DP, initially formed as Roh's Uri Party, has sought to exploit the present climate of shock, sadness, and anger.

As for "political murder," many people undoubtedly feel that government prosecution of Roh may have driven him to his death. There are, however, few signs of a premeditated political assassination orchestrated by Lee or his right-wing Grand National Party (GNP). Nevertheless, the transformation of Roh into a martyr has only provided a focus for anti-Lee sentiment and weakened his government.

Roh's background

The media tributes to Roh Moo-hyun were effusive, hailing him as a morally upstanding reformer and champion of democracy, workers,

women, and the poor. Roh, however, was a bourgeois politician, a member of a capitalist party, and thus a representative of class interests in fundamental contradiction to those of the South Korean working class.

The son of poor farmers, Roh did not receive a formal education beyond commercial high school. After his military service from 1968 to 1971, he taught himself law and passed the bar exam in 1975. He served as a Daejeon district court judge in 1977, practiced tax law from 1978, and took an interest in human rights during the 1981 Burim Incident. He represented students who were arrested and tortured for almost two months on charges of reading pro-North Korean literature in their Burim book club.

Following the Burim case, Roh participated in the June 10, 1987, pro-democracy uprising that ousted military dictator Chun Doo-hwan. For pursuing the death of a striking worker that year, Roh was arrested and his law practice suspended. He formally entered politics by joining Kim Young-sam's Democratic Reunification Party in 1988 and was elected to the National Assembly, serving on a special committee to investigate government corruption.

Roh's reputation grew after a nationally televised hearing in 1988, during which he questioned Chun and other officials about the 1980 Gwangju uprising, which Chun brutally suppressed. Roh became a member of President Kim Dae-jung's cabinet from 1998 to 2002 and Maritime Affairs and Fisheries Minister from 2000 to 2001. As an adviser to Kim's Millennium Democratic Party (MDP), Roh visited a Daewoo plant in 2001 to work out a government-union deal and was pelted with eggs by workers.

Amid growing disaffection with the pro-market agenda of Kim Dae-jung, it appeared likely that the right-wing GNP would win the 2002 presidential election. Roh, however, won an upset victory by appealing to growing anti-US sentiment fuelled by sharpening tensions between the Bush administration and North Korea. Large protests had also erupted over the presence of US troops in South Korea after the failed prosecution of two US army sergeants, whose armored vehicle had fatally crushed two middle school girls.

Having promised to end corruption, reduce US influence, and help workers, women, and the elderly, Roh soon lost public support through his pro-business and pro-US policies. He implemented harsh labor laws, setting riot police against striking workers, and in 2003 agreed to send 670 South Korean troops to assist the US-led occupation of Iraq, despite widespread protests and antiwar sentiment. Roh and his loyalists split from the MDP and formed the short-lived Uri Party (UP) in 2003.

Hoping to exploit growing public resentment, the opposition parties impeached Roh on March 12, 2004, for a minor breach of election law. He had publicly expressed his hopes for a UP victory in the April 2004 general election—an infraction of a legal ban on any presidential involvement in campaigning. The impeachment, the first for a South Korean president, backfired. The majority of South Koreans rejected the opposition move, and the UP won the election. The Constitutional Court overturned Roh's impeachment, and he was reinstated.

Protests continued to grow against South Korean involvement in the US war in Iraq, particularly after the beheading of civilian translator Kim Sun-il by Al Qaeda-linked extremists. Dismissing polls showing that 60 percent of South Koreans opposed the military deployment, Roh boosted troop numbers to 3,000, and claimed they were rendering "humanitarian assistance." In reality, Roh was strengthening the South Korean alliance

with the US and potentially staking a claim in the oil wealth of Iraq, all in disregard of democracy. By 2007, Roh was forced to reduce the number of South Korean troops in Iraq to 1,200.

South Korea also had 210 army engineers and medics assisting the US occupation of Afghanistan. In February 2007, a Taliban suicide bombing claimed the first South Korean military casualty. Five months later, 23 South Korean missionaries were taken hostage by the Taliban, and two male captives were murdered. Public pressure at home forced Roh to negotiate release of the survivors. South Korean troops were withdrawn from Afghanistan in December 2007 and from Iraq in December 2008.

When Roh left office in 2008, his administration was widely regarded as a failure. Having alienated large sections of voters with his broken promises, Roh paved the way for the GNP in the December 2007 presidential election. Public resentment, however, quickly emerged against the new Lee administration, whose pledges to provide economic growth collapsed in the face of global financial turmoil and recession.

When US beef imports were resumed in April 2008—through a deal made under Roh in November 2007—fears over mad cow disease ignited student protests in May, which evolved into a mass political movement. In June 2008, 100,000 people in Seoul and one million nationwide demonstrated with calls for the president's ouster.

Behind the popular discontent and daily demonstrations over imported beef were broader concerns about rising commodity prices, the economic slowdown, and rising unemployment. Lee's unabashedly pro-Washington regime, his aggressive pro-market policies, and his hard-line stance against North Korea, which destabilized inter-Korean relations, only helped fuel opposition. Lee responded with repression and arrests.

The outpouring of public sympathy for Roh following his death is certainly misplaced in view of his record in office. Despite its politically confused and diffuse character, however, the placing of Roh on a pedestal as a "defender of the poor" and "a man of the people" against President Lee, the wealthy businessman, points to an underlying bitterness at the deepening social divide in South Korea and portends great political convulsions.



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