

Policy Forum 05-79A: South Korean President Battles Lame Duck Status

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Recommended Citation

"Policy Forum 05-79A: South Korean President Battles Lame Duck Status", NAPSNet Policy Forum, September 27, 2005, <https://nautilus.org/napsnet/napsnet-policy-forum/south-korean-president-battles-lame-duck-status/>

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Policy Forum Online 05-78A: September 27th, 2005

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By Bruce Klingner

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I. Introduction

Bruce Klingner, Korea analyst for Eurasia Group, the world's largest political risk consultancy firm,

writes: "Pyongyang's actions will affect the public's perceptions of Roh's engagement policy. North Korea's agreement to a joint statement of principles on 19 September might have offered a respite to Roh's declining popularity had Pyongyang not followed with a provocative statement within 24 hours... Despite \$3.5 billion in South Korean aid during the past decade, Seoul has achieved little change to North Korean behavior or the nature of its regime."

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II. Essay by Bruce Klingner

- South Korean President Battles Lame Duck Status
by Bruce Klingner

President Roh Moo-hyun entered the second half of his five-year presidency struggling to reverse his dwindling political influence and overcome growing perceptions that he has become a "lame duck" president. Roh faces a premature diminution of power brought on by declining public support, a blistering series of attacks by an opposition party bitterly opposed to his policies and continuing corruption accusations against close personal aides. Although domestic and international factors have affected the president, his troubles are largely self-inflicted. Roh's diminished political stature will hamper his ability to implement crucial economic and political reforms and achieve South Korean foreign policy objectives.

Fading public support. President Roh's approval ratings have plummeted since his inauguration. Although he gained a short-lived resurgence of popularity in response to his 2003 call for a referendum on his presidency and the electorate backlash against the 2004 impeachment, his approval ratings have steadily declined. Shortly after assuming office, Roh alienated his critical political base of young, liberal voters by abandoning several progressive campaign pledges. By the 100th day of his presidency, his approval ratings had fallen to 50%, way below the 60-80% ratings of predecessors Kim Dae-jung and Kim Yong-sam at the similar mark.

A 12 July poll by Munhwa Daily and the Korea Society Opinion Institute (KSOI) showed only 25% of the public currently approves of Roh's handling of the presidency. Support for the ruling Uri Party is down to 19% and less than 20% of survey respondents said the party has a chance to win the 2007 presidential election. Most troubling for the Uri Party is that several recent surveys show it losing support among young voters, one of its key constituencies and previously staunchest supporters.

Corruption scandals taint Roh administration. Despite a campaign pledge to eliminate government corruption, throughout his presidency Roh has been beset by scandals involving close aides. Although there have not been any credible accusations against Roh personally, the scandals provide fodder for political opponents to criticize the president and derail his policy initiatives. The latest series of allegations involve Representative Lee Kwang-jae, a long-time aide to Roh, who has been accused of orchestrating the National Railroad's misguided investment in a Russian oil project, which resulted in a multi-million dollar loss for the company. Two Roh aides, former Presidential Secretary for Economic Affairs Chung Tae-in and former Chairman of the Presidential Committee on Northeast Asia Cooperation Initiative Moon Chung-in, were indicted in August 2005 for exercising undue influence in support of the Haengdam Island development project.

Concerns over suitability as president. Roh will likely continue high-risk tactics that needlessly raise tensions and distract the government from addressing the serious issues facing the country. He likely could have derailed the impeachment process and prevented the accompanying domestic crisis

by issuing an apology or mea culpa. His determination, or arrogance as some would claim, reinforced his image as reckless and politically clumsy, even as he is credited with a wily sense of political gamesmanship. His recent proposal to abrogate some of his presidential authority to form a "grand coalition" with the opposition GNP has been dismissed as an unconstitutional political ploy by a weak and beleaguered president. Roh's stunning 30 August statement that he was willing to resign in return for opposition party support in overcoming South Korea's divisive regionalism reflects both his fervent idealism as well as a high-risk political tactic to rebound from plummeting public approval ratings. Roh is unlikely to resign the presidency, however, since the opposition has firmly rebuffed his overtures, though he could choose to resign from the ruling Uri Party to symbolically distance himself from partisan politics. A poll showed only 39% of the public in favor and 49% opposed to idea of coalition government. His unusual public displays of self-criticism and off-the-cuff policy statements have unnerved the populace and raised concerns over his aptitude as president. During a nationally televised speech in 2003, Roh bemoaned, "I feel incompetent as a president and a sense of crisis that I will not be able to perform my duties."

Policymaking hampered by amateurism and government infighting. Roh's implementation of a decentralized, non-hierarchical governmental structure has led to a dysfunctional policymaking structure marked by confusion and animosity amongst the Blue House (presidential office), the prime minister, the ruling Uri Party, and the legislature. He exacerbated the chaos by an over-reliance on politically inexperienced aides and delegating extensive power to 23 presidential committees. Prime Minister Lee Hae-chan warned against the "domination of presidential aides and private organizations." According to a World Bank report, the quality of South Korea's governance ranking fell measurably during the past two years in several categories, including: political stability, effectiveness of civil servants and administrative service, quality of regulation, and corruption control.

Roh has vacillated on his policies towards the US and the economy, sending conflicting signals on the importance of the alliance and the government's attitude towards foreign direct investment. He has implemented a series of inconsistent policies that have often been withdrawn when confronted by opposition by the public, the Uri Party or advocacy groups. As a result, he has alienated both conservatives and liberals, undermining his political base and constraining his influence.

Ruling party divided over ideology, policy. The ruling Uri Party is consumed by infighting between "pragmatist" and "progressive" factions struggling for control over the future direction of the party. The party's disastrous showing in the April 2005 by-elections led some senior party members to discuss forming a moderate faction within the party to counterbalance ideologically-driven members and counter some members of Roh's cabinet, including Unification Minister Chung Dong-young. A member of the Uri Party's Standing Committee characterized the party as "a serious case on the verge of death."

The status of South Korea's long-awaited national economic recovery is foremost on the electorate's mind, more so than the North Korean nuclear threat or ideological differences between political parties. Despite the president's repeated promises to focus his attention on improving the economy, he is perceived as having expended his political capital on peripheral issues, such as relocating the national capital from Seoul, rescinding the National Security Law and probing into historical issues. Economic indexes for the first half of 2005 were adjusted downward in July to 3%, lower than last year's growth and contrary to Roh's promises of 7% growth, raising public and investor concerns. The government front-loaded government spending in the beginning of the year in an attempt to jump-start the economy, though to little avail.

Squandering his political advantage. Roh emerged from his 2004 impeachment saga with a legislative majority, a severely weakened opposition, and a popular mandate that provided a

honeymoon period in which the electorate was generally supportive of his progressive policies. Roh was unable to press his advantage to push reform legislation through the National Assembly. The president's inaction caused public support to dissipate and eventually resurrected criticism of his policies and leadership. The level and ferocity of acrimony within the National Assembly resumed, impairing the legislature's ability to reach consensus on domestic reform bills.

2005 By-elections signal Roh's weakened status. The resounding defeat suffered by the ruling Uri Party in the April 2005 by-elections reflected an electorate that remains frustrated over Roh's failure to achieve progress on domestic issues. The party lost every race -- six parliamentary, seven mayoral and gubernatorial, and 31 local legislative, including Roh's hometown -- and failed to regain its majority in the National Assembly. The main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) was emboldened to step up criticism of the president's policies, including his handling of relations with the US and North Korea.

Roh's early July characterization of the current legislative stalemate as an "emergency situation" reflected a belated realization of the repercussions of his Uri Party's devastating defeat in the April by-elections. The president's grudging acceptance of the need for a coalition government reverses his previous attempt to achieve legislative objectives through informal relationships with minor parties. Roh will face challenges since elements of both likely coalition partners, the Democratic Labor Party and the Millennium Democratic Party, have expressed opposition.

Down but not out. Perhaps Roh's biggest advantage is that the main opposition GNP has been unable to capitalize on the president's problems. The rise in public support for the GNP expressed by the April 2005 by-elections was temporary since it reflected a negative reaction to president's failures rather than a shift in support for GNP policies. The GNP has so far failed to convert its election victory into tangible political benefits due to its own bitter infighting between younger, reform-minded members and older, traditional conservatives. GNP Chairwoman Park Geun-hye has been unable to bridge this gap, and the party is likely to remain divided, with the moderates gaining support from the "New Right" movement, a collection of conservative-minded Koreans who are uncomfortable with the old-style politics of the GNP. Since the elections, support for the GNP has fallen and there are persistent rumors of a break-up of the party.

A pox on both your houses. Despite declining support for the Uri Party, this has not materialized into support for any of the opposition parties. Current polls show public support to be extremely low and evenly split among the three main parties. A 12 July KSOI poll showed public support was only 26%, down 2.7% from two weeks earlier. The poll showed 38% supported no party. The electorate feels increasingly alienated from the government and skeptical that either party provides a prospect for change. Each parliamentary election, including the October 2005 by-elections, will likely be perceived as a mandate either for the president or the opposition. The results, however, will more likely reflect tactical changes in electorate perceptions rather than a strategic shift in allegiance.

Rudderless ship of state. Roh's declining political influence will impede implementation of necessary political and fiscal reforms, undermine confidence in South Korea's economic future, and impede progress on six party talks. Revelations of additional corruption involving the president or his aides, as well as the uncertainty resulting from extended investigations, would further hinder Roh's ability to refocus the public's attention on measures needed to improve South Korean competitiveness.

Economic stagnation. Consumer and investor confidence in South Korea's economic recovery has remained tenuous and volatile due to domestic and international events. The rising price of oil has undermined hopes of improved economic status by year's end. The deputy premier for finance and economy recently assessed that the economy "may fall into a long-term recession like that of Japan."

Nationalist foreign policy. Declining public support may lead Roh to pursue increasingly nationalist policies. His strident rhetoric against Japan in response to the Dokdo Island and Japanese textbook issues led to a short-term response in public support. Similarly, large segments of Roh's political base would support stronger anti-American statements and policy.

North Korea as wild card. Pyongyang's actions will affect the public's perceptions of Roh's engagement policy. North Korea's agreement to a joint statement of principles on 19 September might have offered a respite to Roh's declining popularity had Pyongyang not followed with a provocative statement within 24 hours. Although North Korean statements reflected Pyongyang's efforts to define that vaguely worded statement rather than a repudiation of negotiations, they dampened some of the excessive euphoria and underscored that none of the issues had been resolved. South Korea's legislature and public may balk at the rising cost of Seoul's engagement policy. South Korea's proposal to provide two million kilowatts of electricity to the North would cost \$11bn through 2018 and was predicated on being in lieu of Seoul's obligation to 70% of the cost of the \$4.5bn LWR project. Despite \$3.5 billion in South Korean aid during the past decade, Seoul has achieved little change to North Korean behavior or the nature of its regime.

President Roh has limited remaining time to accomplish his objectives and his influence will decrease exponentially as the end of his term approaches. It will be increasingly apparent that Roh is unable to provide effective leadership for the nation at a time of critical domestic and international challenges.

III. Nautilus Invites Your Responses

The Northeast Asia Peace and Security Network invites your responses to this essay. Please send responses to: napsnet-reply@nautilus.org . Responses will be considered for redistribution to the network only if they include the author's name, affiliation, and explicit consent.

Produced by The Nautilus Institute for Security and Sustainable Development
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