

THE NEW POLITICAL PARADIGM IN SOUTH KOREA: SOCIAL CHANGE AND THE ELITE STRUCTURE

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I. Introduction

Social change may be evolutionary or revolutionary or, at times, both. Similarly, administrations may be caught up in and attempt to manage change, or institute it, or both. Although there has been a gradual transformation of elements of South Korean society and international recognition of its exceptional and almost explosive economic accomplishments, the Republic of Korea (ROK; South Korea) has had two major instigated social changes—virtual social revolutions—in its elite structure and policies between its founding with the installation of its first government under President Syngman Rhee in 1948 and the inauguration of President Roh Moo-hyun in 2003. We are now witnessing the third such change—one planned with profound implications both for the internal affairs of the republic and for its international relations, especially those with North Korea and the United States. In part this is innovative and in part responsive to continuing societal transformation. The first instituted change in 1961 may not have been planned as such, although that was one effect, while the second in 1997 was a result of deliberate policy. This new change will affect the “new paradigm for transpacific collaboration” that is the title and theme of this conference.

The contours of this quiet revolution may be all too apparent to those who live in South Korea, but they are less well understood by those in the United States who need to be cognizant of their importance, understand their dynamics, and anticipate their effects.¹ We should not attribute change in Korean society simplistically only to the election of a new and unusual Korean president, which occurred as a result of the mobilization of youth in his support with the assistance of a new technology and a broad populist agenda. Clearly, this phenomenon is more complex. In spite of an aging population and low birth rates, Korea’s youthful population is now politically prominent because of the extent of its participation in that process. This has occurred not only because of the development and spread of a new technology with which young Koreans are exceptionally comfortable, but also perhaps because of a malaise among them in spite of their growing affluence. Although they have greater wealth, their social and economic opportunities at the societal apex have been somewhat restricted by an entrenched elite based in considerable part on an educational structure that allows the perpetuation of their status and entrenched interests. President Roh’s more egalitarian and populist appeal, as well as his personal example, have been attractive. We should not underestimate the depth of the implications of what is under way, even if what has been suggested or planned does not totally reach fruition, as already seems evident. This paper contends that these attempted changes are important and may be as historically significant as those two previous revolutions, although they are unlikely to be as sweeping or as permanent as some might desire or expect.

1. It is significant, and inexplicable to this author, that the international media resident in Seoul have not reported on these developments and the attitudes that have engendered them.

This paper does not attempt, and should not be interpreted as attempting, to judge the value or the legitimacy of the policies that embody these changes. Ultimately, the Korean people will pass judgement on what is planned in the new “participatory democracy,” as this administration has called itself, but the United States will have to determine how such changes, and the attitudes that have prompted their consideration, will affect Korean-U.S. relations and the alliance and initiate any adjustments in U.S. thinking and operations that may be necessary. Koreans, for their part, need to apprehend the implications of these proposed changes for the alliance as well, including the likely domestic response within the United States to Korean behavior.

II. Social and Policy Tsunamis of the Past

Twice in the short history of the ROK we have witnessed the intrusion of new and important elements into the traditional, remarkably stable social fabric of South Korea. Even the trauma of the Japanese colonial rule and the deaths and dislocations of the Korean War did not destroy the tapestry of the essentially six-century-old *yangban*-oriented social elite in the Korea. They retained their social hold over society in the South, although in North Korea their elimination was virtually complete through exhaustive purges and migration.

The military coup d'état of 1961, however, brought into power and influence a new element that quickly transformed the elite structure of South Korea and altered cultural habits and affiliations. Military officers of unidentifiable social backgrounds quickly became the new power entrepreneurs of that society. Where bureaucrats and academics had been the spouses of choice for aspiring families with daughters, to the head of that list often went the military officer. The limited social mobility that had been present through a highly restricted university educational structure that was controlled by the remnants of the old gentry class was opened through the military channel that allowed even the sons of both the rural and urban poor to acquire a good education through the military academy.² As military rule progressed, the expansion of higher education was a major accomplishment and change. Servicing the new growth of the private sector that was an accomplishment of the Park Chung-hee regime also diluted that gentry preserve. These events served to move Korean society toward a more egalitarian structure even though hierarchy is still deeply ingrained in social and linguistic forms.

2. It should be remembered that high schools did not exist in rural settings, but only in urban areas and market towns, and that transport was difficult. Thus it was highly unlikely that bright village males could get a secondary, let alone a higher, education unless they had relatives with whom to stay in proximity to high schools. Enrollment in tertiary education increased from about 100,000 in 1961 to more than a million by about the end of the Park era. The development of blue-collar skills through military training also sparked Korean industrial development. At the beginning of the Park era, mobility through economic channels was still highly restricted.

This tsunami, however, may be of even a greater magnitude than the previous two. It has broader appeal and a far wider social base whereas the military coup d'état of 1961, however powerful, at first was limited to a small percentage of the population, and the second change, in 1997, began by affecting about one-quarter of the population and was far more influential in peninsular policy than in internal affairs. This third tsunami has the potential, even if only partly realized, to influence international as well as internal affairs.

The election of Kim Dae-jung as president in 1997 and his inauguration in February 1998 brought the second wave of social transformation. This began a conscious “affirmative action” program designed to foster proportionate representation of the Cholla provinces in governance. From an area that had been subject to evident discrimination in the employment of these citizens from the Southwest into high positions of administration, a clear effort was made to begin to recruit and promote those from the Cholla provinces.³ Some may charge that this resulted in further fracturing the body politic along regional and provincial lines. Although this was in part true, that split had already occurred with the dominance of the Kyungsang area since the military coup d'état and the recruitment and capital investments in those provinces. The provincial split is still a matter of President Roh's concern.

The Kim Dae-jung administration also encouraged the social validation of former dissidents (Kim Dae-jung himself was one)—“pariah” Koreans who had fought against dictatorial governments. The passage of the Democratic Movement Compensation Act and its enforcement ordinances affirmed a new elite who had fought against oppressive government, employers, businesses, schools, and public media (since 7 August 1969, according to the law) that had denied them their constitutional rights, although the definitions often caused dissension (Sonn 2004).

Both of these administrations resulted in foreign policy shifts and disquiet in the United States. The Park Chung-hee coup d'état caused profound uncertainty in U.S. policy circles at its beginning because of Park's earlier involvement in the Yosun-Sunch'on uprising that had Communist connections and because he overthrew a democratically elected, if ineffective, government backed by the United States. The mistrust that was so evident in President Park's relations with the United States was to last until his

3. Not only had there been discrimination against those from the Cholla provinces in terms of the percentages of those from that region in ministerial and subcabinet positions in relation to the percentage of the Cholla provinces' population, but studies have shown that average incomes were lower and business failures were higher in those regions. There also seemed to be a conscious effort to construct less major infrastructure (roads, for example) in that region until the 1980s. The critical Kwangju insurrection, which was regarded as the greatest tragedy since the Korean War, was directly related to this discrimination.

assassination. Park did not want to, and felt he could not, rely on the United States, and he set out on a determined policy of defensive self-reliance.⁴ In Park's later years, especially under his repressive Yushin administration (1972–79) that was in conflict with President Jimmy Carter's human rights policies, U.S.-Korea relations worsened.

If President Kim Dae-jung had been elected in 1992 instead of 1997, his election would have caused concern, perhaps even some overt military action among some of the Korean military, many of whom considered him far too radical and conciliatory toward North Korea. But by 1997 the atmosphere had changed, and the Asian financial crisis that affected Korea eliminated any credibility of the Kim Young-sam administration and those connected with him, as he had tried to deny the advent of the crisis and criticized the foreign press for reporting on it. The Cold War had been over for almost a decade, and North Korea had been materially weakened by its economic collapse and famine while South Korea had become accustomed to the democratic change of administrations through elections. In spite of this, Kim Dae-jung's openings to North Korea were a distinct revolution in foreign affairs.

The second element of this revolution was, thus, relations with North Korea, and an effort was made to secure the South's leadership in negotiating with the North, rather than having the leadership remain with the United States, with which it had generally rested, especially during the negotiations for what became the Agreed Framework in 1994.⁵ South Korea's leadership was demonstrated through the Sunshine Policy.

The Sunshine Policy was an innovation that prompted concerns among some of the more conservative Koreans, but, following the establishment of the Agreed Framework between the United States and North Korea in October 1994, the Sunshine Policy seemed to be a reasonable extension of a joint effort to ameliorate the famine in the North and ensure that the North did not engage in a nuclear weapons program. In effect, a shift in the leadership of dealing with the North had occurred—from the United States during the Agreed Framework negotiations to South Korea under the Sunshine Policy.

4. This was prompted in part by the Guam Doctrine (sometimes called the Nixon Doctrine) of 1969, under which the United States said it would defend its Pacific allies but fight no more ground wars in Asia, as well as the unilateral decision to withdraw one U.S. infantry division in 1972. This sense of distrust resulted in the buildup of heavy industry, chemical, and national defenses in South Korea, including a nuclear weapons program, the latter effectively stopped by the United States.

5. The two ineffectual efforts of the South to negotiate with the North were the South-North agreement of 4 July 1972 and the agreement of the end of December 1991, but neither produced any real progress in relations. During the Agreed Framework negotiations, the North Koreans refused to deal with the South.

Whatever the internal South Korean dissatisfaction with the extent of that policy, the principle of which was generally accepted by the South Korean people, concern was heightened because, as the hallmark of the Kim administration that subordinated all other policies to that end, an all-out effort was made to assuage the North. This resulted in payoffs to the North, culminating with the Pyongyang summit, but with little sign of North Korean reciprocity.⁶ The concern for success in that policy was clearly apparent by August 2000 when South Korean publishers pledged in Pyongyang not to print criticism of the North as well as in the avoidance by the Kim administration of discussing North Korean human rights abuses. As the Kim administration wound down and the George W. Bush administration was inaugurated in the United States, President Kim's lead in dealing with the North came to a halt when President Bush's antipathy toward the regime in the North became public during the summit between President Bush and President Kim in March 2001, seen live on South Korean television. That set back ROK-U.S. relations and effectively undercut President Kim's administration. The change in peninsula negotiating leadership back to the United States was strengthened as a result of the revelation of North Korean cheating on the Agreed Framework and the public decision by the United States to attempt to stop North Korean nuclear programs.

Throughout this period of some 45 years, however, elements of the old elite structure continued to exert influence in the society. Key officials found important posts that transcended any particular administration, and each of those two significant changes took place with the new administrators understanding that, at least among the older and more conservative elements of the population, continuity in both internal and external policies was necessary for Korea to develop and for its protection in the Cold War and with the potential and constant specter of North Korean aggression.

III. President Roh Moo-hyun and the Egalitarian Tilt

President Roh's election was as unexpected as it was unprecedented. Having risen to prominence and power through his own efforts, without the normal credentials of the elite educational and social establishment in South Korea,⁷ and as a campaigner and

6. Some advocates of the Sunshine Policy felt that the North Korean response need not have been a clear quid pro quo for some South Korean action but, instead, a prolonged and diffused reciprocity that would be clear over time. When priorities become primary in Korea, the power of that presidency elicits conformity and response from a responsive bureaucracy that may discard the niceties of legal restraints in the interests of what becomes national policy. In effect, the stringent advocate (President Kim) of implementing the call by the International Monetary Fund after the Asian financial crisis for a separation among the state, financial institutions, and businesses to prevent inappropriate financial actions had become the instigator of such an action through the payment to Pyongyang through Hyundai.

7. In March 2002, in the early stages of the Korean presidential maneuvering, about 70 percent of the candidates had Seoul National University backgrounds.

advocate of human rights and less reliance on the United States, he in himself was a personal manifestation of a social revolution, upturning most expectations of how a member of the elite might be enlisted.⁸ Kim Dae-jung was in debt to the United States, as he often publicly admitted, because the United States had twice saved his life from both the Park and Chun administrations. President Roh, however, had built a good part of his career distancing himself from the United States, and in contrast with many in all previous administrations, he had never even visited the United States.⁹ It soon became evident, however, that the revolution was represented by not only the president himself but also the administration he brought in and those he excluded. Even if South Korean society had been evolving, modernizing, and becoming more globally oriented, the election of President Roh was a distinct shock to the establishment.

President Roh himself and his elevation through an election to the highest office are evidence of such societal changes. His and his administration's efforts to transform elements of the power elite in that society in addition should be seen as both innovation and an attempt to manage what has now become more extensive change, led in part by a more vocal portion of the Korean populace that has new, technological means of expressing its views and influencing the political process.¹⁰ Ubiquitous cell phones and the Internet have enabled the younger population to have access to nontraditional and nontraditionally controlled avenues of information and to mobilize quickly (in the street or through the ballot box) to support or oppose political causes. President Roh may have recognized this trend and capitalized on it to win the presidency, but subsequently he has had to meet sometimes antithetical objectives—the expectations of his supporters and the pursuit of national interests. Managing revolutions or even social waves, if not tsunamis, requires deft abilities.¹¹

Policy differences between South Korea and the United States over North Korea and the North's nuclear policy are the most obvious and also the most important immediate issues between the two allies. The undeniable importance of these

8. The stress on formal education and degrees in Korea led observers to believe that future presidents would all have Ph.D. degrees. When Chung Mong-jun of the Hyundai family received a Ph.D. degree from the Johns Hopkins University, one observer remarked that you might not need a Ph.D. degree to run Hyundai, but you probably did need one to become the president of the country.

9. Through unprecedented high-level (vice presidential) access provided to Lee Hoi-chang during his pre-election trip to Washington, the United States signaled its choice of candidate, which may have had a backlash effect, at least on the youth. For an informative essay on President Roh, see Pastreich (2005).

10. I am indebted to Paul Chamberlin for his comments on the management of such change.

11. Some have argued that President Roh has not turned "left" but has turned toward transparency and world standards. Whether left, center-left, or liberal, there seems little doubt of his egalitarian approach to policy. In a sense, the liberalized political system of South Korea has resulted in that state becoming a "normal" political state with a broad spectrum of views, wherever President Roh may fit along it.

differences, papered over in official U.S. and Korean statements that all is well between the allies, unintentionally diverts attention from the internal shifts taking place that, although less immediate and threatening, are still significant and affect the attitudes and policy stance toward the North and the United States. These policy differences are quite understandable because U.S. policy priorities are worldwide (nuclear nonproliferation, missile controls, and nonstate terrorists, for example) and, when regional, are first focused on Japan and then on Northeast Asia, of which the Korean peninsula is simply one part; however, South Korea's policies are focused first on the peninsula itself and then on the Northeast Asian region.

Both Korea and the United States are in the throes of heightened nationalism, the latter in the post–11 September 2001 period. To Americans, this is most obvious in their concern over anti-U.S. demonstrations in the South, but “alliance fatigue” and a surge in U.S. interest in a flexible defense posture, including the movement of U.S. troops from the ROK (without the necessity of South Korean concurrence) should not be overlooked. In the South, this takes the position of public interest in policies more independent of the United States, although the alliance is still of some importance in both political and security terms, at least to the older, established elite.¹² In the interests of the alliance and national security, South Korea has ceded to the United States elements of its sovereignty (for example, combined forces command, the Status of Forces Agreement, and missile range restrictions), and public pressures mount to establish a more equitable relationship.

There have been changes, some not so subtle, in the position of the ROK and the United States regarding their stances toward the North. The policy differences toward the North have rested on markedly divergent assumptions on which to base policy. One is how much coercive threat each side is prepared publicly to exhibit toward the North. The United States constantly reiterated its position that no policy (including force) was off the table while it declared to the North that the United States would not attack it and that its sovereignty was recognized. South Korea believed that violence was not an option and that war was the worst possibility, and it offered significant economic concessions that to some in the United States smacked of appeasement. The six-party talks in Beijing that ended in September 2005 with an agreed statement papered over differences in timing and emphasis between the United States and the North, which became apparent the following day with North Korean statements on the timing of the light-water reactor issue. Those reactors (included in the Agreed

12. One current manifestation of that change is an attempt by progressives to tear down the statue of General Douglas MacArthur in Incheon, commemorating the Incheon landing that turned the tide in the Korean War. They charge the United States prevented the unification of the peninsula under North Korean auspices. After a prolonged silence, President Roh indicated (significantly on a trip to New York) that the statue should remain.

Framework of 1994) had earlier been discarded as an option by the Bush administration, but in September 2005 it agreed to include them, probably at the insistence of the Chinese, in the final statement at some indefinite time.

A newer element of policy debate is over the question of human rights in North Korea. With effective lobbying by South Korean Christian and conservative groups, this has been taken up by many in the U.S. Congress as an issue of concern, and the Bush administration (at the insistence of the Congress) has appointed an ardent human rights coordinator on North Korea, much to the chagrin of the South Korean government. Although there is no reason to question the intensity of feeling of many in the South over the plight of their brethren in the North (and 10 percent of the South's population have their family origins in the North), this is also a convenient political issue to be raised against the administration of President Roh, which—like that of President Kim Dae-jung—does not want to offer impediments to the improvement of relations with the North.¹³

Although policy toward the North has captured international attention, in a quite different but equally important manner the Roh government's efforts to transform South Korean society are significant and important both internally and for the future of the alliance.

IV. Political Elements of Regime Change

President Roh's surprise election has been analyzed many times and needs no further explication here. The role of youth and the changing of generations, the use of the Internet to mobilize South Korea's youth, the growth of nationalism, and the rise of anti-U.S. sentiment especially among that element of the population are all well known (Steinberg 2004). The development of a new political climate reflected in the makeup of (self-identified) progressives or liberals in the National Assembly mirrors this change as well and has resulted in a more ideological orientation toward the left. Some 71 percent of the Uri Party consider themselves progressives, while the National Assembly as a whole has more than doubled its self-identified liberal members (Steinberg and Shin 2005).

Although the implementation of new policies will depend in part on the ability of the president's Uri Party to regain a majority in the National Assembly through coalition building—a majority that is elusive and has shifted over time—the composition of the assembly itself is indicative of the changes that are taking place. Not only is the Uri Party overwhelmingly made up of self-identified progressives, but a third national

13. Huh Jung, a North Korean ambassador to the United Nations (UN), in 1993 or 1994 told this writer during a personal interview that the United States would first be interested in nuclear issues, then missiles, and "then you will move the goalpost and become interested in human rights." I indicated this was probably accurate.

party, with 13 percent of the vote in the most recent election, has arisen. The Democratic Labor Party has a platform that would appeal to many of those in the democratic left throughout the world. There have been attempts by the president to form a majority coalition, but that has not proved successful. The composition of the assembly itself, however, has markedly altered.¹⁴ President Roh has also proposed a coalition with the Grand National Party, but this has been rejected by the latter's leadership.

V. Remaking of the South Korean Elite

The administration's broad policy agenda has been set forth under the banner of participatory democracy. The Web site of the president¹⁵ presents a troika of goals: democracy with the people, a society of balanced development, and an era of peace and prosperity in Northeast Asia. Within this agenda are 12 policy goals that present a comprehensive attempt to improve the state and the lot of the citizenry. There seems little question that President Roh, by both temperament and policy, is interested in a populist set of programs that are aimed at the welfare of the people as a whole. As with many such political platforms worldwide, they may be more hope than are likely to become reality.

Unarticulated as a policy agenda, however, is a series of activities and plans that, taken together (or as Washington parlance would have it, by "connecting the dots," or as a gestalt), convey to this observer an apparent effort to remake the elite structure of South Korean society. Whether this has been a carefully constructed strategy or ad hoc concepts and proposals and however much these various ideas may have been altered or abandoned before they were formally proposed, if all had been implemented, these would have transformed the nature of the elite structure of South Korea. How much of this agenda—as perceived by those outside the president's party or circle—is stated policy, how much is trial balloons attempting to gauge public responses, and how much is the personal views of some of President Roh's stalwarts—or some combination of all of the above—is sometimes unclear, but the pattern seems apparent.¹⁶

14. A continuing characteristic of the Korean political process is that if a government party espouses a particular policy, the opposition party will automatically be against it. So as the government has become more liberal, the opposition has become more conservative.

15. See <http://english.president.go.kr/warp/en/news/goals.php>.

16. This should not imply that President Roh is subservient to public opinion. He decided to send troops to Iraq although 78 percent of the public was against it. President Roh was warned that his decision to send troops should not be made on the assumption that this would change U.S. policy toward North Korea to one more conciliatory and in line with South Korean sensitivities.

In President Roh's address to the nation on the 60th anniversary of national liberation (15 August 2005), he articulated three elements of division: the historical legacy (of pro- and anti-Japanese elements, leftists and rightists, and dictatorial and resistance elements), divisions in the political process, and divisions "caused by social and economic imbalance and disparity." These are themes that he has addressed and that he says he will continue to address.

The new policy agenda is composed of a variety of elements—including the marginalization of the older, continuing elite; proposals to educate a new elite; provision of a differentiated approach to information; and creation of a new policy environment. A discussion of this agenda and its emphasis follows.

Marginalization of the Old Elite

Changes in the policy advisory pool. The policy-oriented group with which the United States has worked over the years has remained relatively constant. These highly educated and internationally astute individuals had often attended graduate schools abroad, mostly in the United States, and represented a moderate body of opinion in favor of improved relations with the United States, however much any individual might have disagreed with U.S. policies in any particular field. In academic circles, they were represented by the Seoul Forum, an informal but highly influential group of mixed academicians and a few businesspeople who could be counted on to be constructive, often constructively critical, of U.S.-Korean relations. This group has now been officially shunned or shunted aside, and a newer, younger group has emerged.¹⁷ A few had been educated at prestigious Korean universities and abroad, but the younger group represent what has been called the "386 generation," many of whom were jailed or were in opposition to the policies of the Park and Chun regimes that had continued with apparent public (but often reluctant) U.S. support for both authoritarian rulers. The new policy advisory group seems far more nationalistic, seems less internationally experienced, believes North Korean intentions are more benign, and is more skeptical of the U.S. role on the peninsula and in the region.

Redistribution of the wealth and the movement of the capital. President Roh's official policy to move the capital from Seoul to the Chungchong region caused considerable consternation in both political and social circles. Although his plan has been declared illegal by the Constitutional Court, the president still intends to move a number of key ministries to the new site and create a new city there. Ostensibly, the

17. A noted exception to this was the appointment as ambassador to the United States of Professor Han Sung-joo, formerly of Korea University and foreign minister under President Kim Young-sam. He seemed outside the regime's inner circle. His appointment seemed designed to reassure the United States and, indeed, it did so.

motive behind this effort was to level provincial inequalities by providing economic incentives to a relatively stagnant part of the country (a part in which President Roh’s party has only marginal support).¹⁸ Although this may be true in part, there is another, supplementary possible explanation. As the World Bank (Leipziger et al. 2002) noted more than a decade ago, income distribution in the ROK was not too bad (even though it got worse following the financial crisis of 1997), but wealth distribution was exceedingly poor. Wealth in South Korea is reflected essentially in real estate holdings, and thus the movement of the country’s capital would have resulted in a major shift in the patterns of wealth among the elite and the creation of a new group of *nouveau riche*. Although the Roh administration could not level income distribution, the basis for the administration is that it might make income distribution less uneven and provide political support to the new, younger generation.¹⁹ Income distribution issues concern the president and transcend the concept of moving the capital or ministries. President Roh is a populist, as was Kim Dae-jung, and he is concerned about the plight of the ordinary Korean citizen.

Eliminating Japanese connections of the past. Another attempt to discredit the former elite is the investigation into those who collaborated with the Japanese during the colonial era. This was demonstrated with the passage in 2004 of the “Special Law on Truths Concerning Anti-Korean Activities During Forcible Japanese Occupation,” and the “Basic Law on the Review of Past History for Truth and Reconciliation.” These were not attempts to accuse anyone of crimes; instead, their intent was to function as the basis for a type of truth commission that would clear up the anomalies of the past. The president called for apologies and reparations, as might be appropriate, perhaps similar to what President Kim Dae-jung had done for earlier dissidents. President Roh made this the topic of his 15 August 2004 Independence Day speech, and he reiterated it a year later.

The opposition immediately interpreted this as an administration attempt to discredit Park Geun-hye, the head of the opposition Grand National Party and the daughter of Park Chung-hee, who had been in the Japanese army. The opposition then insisted that such inquiries also include those who collaborated with the North Koreans when they temporarily occupied large parts of the South in 1950. This would include the father-in-law of President Roh himself. More deeply, however, it was the traditional *yangban* elite that collaborated with the Japanese (as they were the educated group

18. The Park, Chun, and Roh Tae-woo governments were Kyungsang oriented. Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-hyun’s basic support lies in the Cholla provinces, while Kim Jong-pil (who wanted to be a power broker in his later years) was influential in the Chungchong area.

19. The president has also indicated that the administration plans to increase taxes on real estate in order to calm speculation.

in the society); thus, the discrediting of the families of these elements would help purge the past class structure by exposing those who had benefited under the Japanese.²⁰

President Roh is now advocating new pending legislation: the “Special Law on the Recovery of Properties of the People [Who] Carried Out Pro-Japanese, Anti-Korean Activities,” and on 16 August 2005, he stated (Office of the President 2005): “A historical anomaly will be eliminated so that the descendants of the perpetrators of the anti-Korean activities will no longer be able to enjoy the wealth accumulated by their ancestors at the cost of the nation and country.” This will no doubt incite vociferous debate within the National Assembly and in the society at large, and it raises many legal issues, including that of *ex post facto* legislation. It should be noted that North Korea has carried out some of the most extensive purges of pro-Japanese elements because those who were close to the Japanese often were the largest landowners in the North. One could argue that Kim Il-sung’s initial legitimacy came from his (real or purported) anti-Japanese guerrilla activities and from his purge of pro-Japanese elements. The obverse of that coin was the charge that the South Korean government was illegitimate because it was a lackey of the Americans and retained Japanese collaborators.

Is this anti-Japanese stance an attempt to define, redefine, or crystallize Korean identity? In some sense, the cultural survival of the people has depended on its fierce protection of language and culture, and in the broadest sense the “purification” of the past may be viewed as related to this inchoate need.

Reforming the *chaebol*. The *chaebol* have been a continuing concern of the President Roh, and their essential stranglehold on the well-being of the economy and its trading patterns has caused concerns in a number of administrations and among those who wish for greater equity in access to markets. As a human rights advocate, lawyer Roh had often sided with labor against *chaebol* management.²¹ What the president realistically can do, beyond strengthening monopoly legislation or enforcing tax codes, seems quite limited; his concern is a product of the exceedingly extensive role of the *chaebol* because Korea is a country heavily dependent on trade they largely control. The president’s priority, however, seems to be the development of the ROK as the economic and financial hub in Northeast Asia. This concern, to which he has devoted considerable attention and personnel, has meant that *chaebol* reform must be a second

20. The first “victim” ironically was the chairman of the Uri Party, whose father had been in the notorious Japanese police.

21. The founder of Hyundai had said that he would never allow labor unions in his conglomerate, but Hyundai was forced to do so later.

priority because the continued prosperity and role of the *chaebol* are required elements for any hub strategy.²²

Education of a New Elite

Seoul National University. There has been intense dissatisfaction among large elements of the Korean population with the elite structure of university education. In the early period of the republic, Korean students who went abroad for graduate studies could virtually be assured of professorial positions in the elite public and private universities in Korea because such degrees conferred upon them great social status and prestige, including better marriage possibilities. As Koreans in great numbers returned from overseas education, and as the openings in these universities obviously diminished, aspirants found themselves at second- or even third-tier universities, universities in smaller provincial areas, or in government-sponsored think tanks attached to various ministries or institutions, such as cities or provinces.

The greatest antipathy was directed at Seoul National University, which was at the apex of all such universities. Some staff and students there exhibited considerable arrogance toward other academicians. There was a profound feeling that there was discrimination in admissions against those from the provinces. Although this was not necessarily a result of deliberate policies, it seemed evident because the school system was so much better in Seoul. Thus, students (whose parents also could afford private tutoring) from Seoul had a far better chance of entry under competitive examinations.²³

Some associated with the Roh administration have advocated changing this elite structure. Some have called for the elimination of Seoul National University (or so the press has reported, although this was not policy), while others have said that in order to ensure equality of admission, the university should be moved to the provinces (near what was to have been the new capital). These efforts have not succeeded, but the continuing disputes over the entrance examinations to Seoul National University reflect the concerns that the old elite structure, with its considerable influence on present elite structure, should be overturned. In part, either status depended on education or education was used to ratify elite status. It is ironic that Seoul National University seems highly nationalistic and the least international of the first-tier universities in Korea.

22. Some have said that President Roh is probusiness but that his emphasis on reform stems from his predilection for equity and transparency.

23. In the early period of industrialization, business and manufacturing managers assigned from Seoul to the provinces often left their families in Seoul so that their children could attend better primary and secondary schools and, thus, university. Some close to the administration charged that the majority of Seoul National University students came from the very affluent area of Kangnam in Seoul, but others claim that only about 12 percent are from that part of Seoul.

Private education and the teachers' union. Private secondary education also was the province of the old elite. Legislation has been proposed and is under debate concerning amending the law on private schools that would make them more accountable and would also give the Korea Teachers and Educational Workers Union a greater say in the management of these schools, which are often controlled by the families of the founders.²⁴ The union, founded in 1989, is known as one of the most radical and left-leaning of such unions, and many attribute the rise in anti-U.S. sentiment among middle school and high school students to its influence. Under new legislation, the union will have a greater say in the management of these schools and will be represented on their boards of trustees. In this manner, the younger generation will be able to be exposed to the values associated with the present administration and its supporters (*Korea Herald* 2005).

Educational reform at the university level. The government has indicated its intention to transform the university educational system in the ROK through the "100-Year Reform Plan for National Education." Citing corruption in appointment of faculty, problems with the tenure system, and outmoded educational practices, the government decided to allocate \$800 million in 2005 for structural change. Picking 15 universities as development centers, the government announced it would "give disadvantages to universities refusing to reform, making it hard for them to survive." A new bureau within the Ministry of Education will handle these changes, including changes at private universities.²⁵ Kim Jin-pyo, deputy prime minister, Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development stated (*Monthly Joongang* 2005): "It is time for universities to also feel the pain of restructuring [along with economic and business restructuring]."

Access to Information

Curbing the antiregime press. In an entourage system of political parties, which has been the general condition of Korean politics although that is changing, loyalties are highly personal and information is an attribute of that personalization of power. It is significant that all Korean administrations of all political persuasions have tried to suppress, control, or modify the views of the opposition. These pressures have ranged from Korean Central Intelligence Agency officials sitting in newspaper editorial offices

24. During the Japanese colonial period, Koreans could avoid confiscation of urban land by founding schools, which were badly needed at that time. Many people did so. Before Korea joined the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) during the administration of President Kim Young-sam, the Korean administration vociferously defended its prevention of teachers forming unions because, so the argument ran, this would be destructive of the authority and prestige of teachers in a Confucian society. On joining the OECD, Korea had to recognize the union and also allow other unions to engage in political activities.

25. State control over many aspects of private education has been traditional in South Korea.

during part of the Park Chung-hee administration, to the purge of more liberal members of the media under Chun Doo-hwan, and to the efforts to control the more right-wing press through audits, fines, and jail terms during the Kim Dae-jung administration.

There is no doubt that since 1987 there has been more freedom of the press than at any period in Korean history. Even within that context, the government's efforts to manipulate opinion and mitigate bad publicity continue. The Roh administration has taken a different approach with the same goal—moderating criticism of the executive branch by the more conservative *Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-A Ilbo*, and *JoongAng Ilbo*. Against the views of the International Press Institute, which monitors press freedom, it has passed legislation that broadens the way that editorial decisions are reached and how distribution takes place. Assembly members have passed legislation against the major papers with the largest circulations, charging them with monopoly practices. President Roh, at the 58th World Newspaper Congress, which met in Seoul on 30 May 2005, stated:

However, this [civil society development] failed to consider the fact that the press itself could become a political power through the monopoly of the market and monopolistic governance. . . . In this light, it is very important to provide for an institutional device capable of restraining the abuse of power by the press. . . . The function of the press to criticize must be emphasized in a society where the critical issue is social cohesion and not democracy, the press should present future-oriented and creative alternatives, instead of fanning friction.

Two compromise press laws have been passed by the National Assembly and went into effect in August 2005. They are the “newspaper law” and the “press arbitration law.” The press arbitration law allows any third party to call for a retraction and refutation even if errors were inadvertent. The Press Arbitration Commission decides these cases.²⁶ The government is planning to set up a special law firm to bring suits against those considered to have broken this law.²⁷ One controversial element is that such cases may be brought within three months, but ongoing investigations such as corruption scandals involve extended periods, and thus the public's concerns may not be met. The newspaper law is said to place caps on the number of markets open to

26. According to *National Assembly of the Republic of Korea: Recently Enacted Laws*, dated 1 January 2005, “This act combines provisions for compensation as set forth in several previous Acts, such as the Act on Guarantee of Freedom and Functions of Newspapers, etc., and Broadcasting Act, etc.” It continues: “The press shall not infringe upon a person's rights regarding his/her life, freedom, physical well-being, health, reputation, privacy, image, name, conversation, publications, private documents, etc.” This would seem to compromise any criticism of any individual. The law became effective six months after passage.

27. Significantly, *Chosun Ilbo* (the most vociferous critic of the Roh government) was cited most frequently, while *Hankyore* (a pro-Roh newspaper) was cited the least number of times.

the press (under an antimonopoly rationale) and provides subsidies, thus undercutting the independence of the press. The major papers affected are those that have been critical of the Roh administration. Under the newspaper law, editorial committees will be set up by labor and management, and a Newspaper Development Committee (composed of Ministry of Labor, National Assembly, and media staff) will distribute funds to such papers where advertising is then 50 percent of page space.²⁸

Press access to government. The government has also restricted the access of the press to government officials, who must have approval before they talk to the media. Although the Korean media and government were operating on a model of ministerial-press relations based on the system in Japan (pools of reporters assigned to each ministry) and although a significant amount of the reportage was in fact government handouts, this further insulates the administration from the press and, indirectly, from the populace. Many newspapers have protested this move because it limits the information available to the public.

The Policy Agenda

Civil service reform. The policy agenda of the Korean government will be affected by the judicial system, which has already found against the state in some cases. The new chief justice of South Korea's Supreme Court, Lee Yong-hun, is expected to recommend the nomination of the replacement of 9 of the 13 justices on that court within the next year, which may change the composition of the generally conservative court. Mr. Lee has indicated that he will not be bound by age or origin in his choices, which may positively affect the ability of the executive branch to get new legislation authorized, including the National Security Law.²⁹ The day following his assumption of office, Chief Justice Lee announced that the court would review previous decisions against dissidents from the authoritarian period to determine whether justice had been subverted (*Chosun Ilbo* 2005).

A new element in the administration's efforts to transform the elite is to reform the bureaucracy, which traditionally has been a critical component of the elite structure. Previous administrations had stipulated that higher-level members of the bureaucracy

28. According to *National Assembly of the Republic of Korea: Recently Enacted Laws*, dated 1 January 2005, the "Act on Guarantee of Freedom and Functions of Newspapers, etc. (Amendment to the previous Registration, etc., of Periodicals Act)" stipulates that "[p]ublishers of periodicals and Internet news sites shall ensure the participation of readers in the decision-making processes, such as editing or production. . . ." The act provides that "in the case of entrusting some functions of the committee to other agencies under a presidential decree. . .," this act will take place after six months [of approval]. In the cases of verification and publication of complaints it will be implemented after eighteen months.

29. I am indebted to Emanuel Pastreich for bringing this to my attention.

would have to declare their assets to prevent corruption and conflicts of interest, but the Roh government has determined that this provision would be extended to the immediate family of any aspirant or member of the higher bureaucracy, in spite of constitutional provisions against “guilt by association.”³⁰ There also has been a new effort to make the bureaucracy more egalitarian through recruitment of those who were not part of the wealthier social elites.

National Security Law. One continuing dispute in South Korea has been over the National Security Law, which in one form or another has existed since the formation of South Korea. Although justified as an antespionage law, it has been indiscriminately used to suppress all dissident elements on charges that they may have held views, read publications, contacted people, or in acted in some manner that seemed to support antistate elements, meaning North Korea. The law also has prevented criticism of South Korea’s social and economic system. Only about 2 percent of those arrested under that law have been charged with spying. It is evident that the law as previously interpreted gave any Korean administration wide latitude in suppressing dissident views.

Debate about this law has continued since the Kim Dae-jung administration. Some believe that the law should be maintained but its provisions changed to reflect the new, nonconfrontational approach to the North. The Roh administration wanted the law eliminated and a new, specific antespionage law passed. The implications of this law go beyond the legislation itself because any accommodation with the North will require both governments to modify their stances in which the “other” has been regarded as the enemy. In a sense, Korean conservatives are fearful that activities associated with the North—such as the formation of legalized institutions to study the North’s *juche* philosophy—would become institutionalized in the South. The question is still under debate.

Related to this aspect of the National Security Law is the vindication of those jailed or repressed for opposition to the Park or Chun regimes. Many were persecuted under the provisions of the National Security Law, and they seek exoneration after many years of vilification even though some now have risen to positions of influence in the executive or legislative branches.

Assistance to North Korea. Strong disagreement exists over questions of North Korea policy. President Roh and the U.S. administration have assiduously attempted to mask the significant emphases and differences that exist between the two countries on the proper approach to North Korea. Although each has modified its position

30. Past governments had discriminated, even persecuted, families of those who had been accused of illegal activities connected with North Korea. After 1987, the constitution was changed to prohibit such actions. See *Dong-A Ilbo* (2005).

somewhat over time, the approaches still diverge. The United States had first called for the elimination of all North Korean nuclear programs, seemingly including those that were designed for peaceful energy production, because the U.S. administration did not trust the North Koreans. The United States seems to have moved somewhat from that position but has also determined that the light-water nuclear reactors that were at the heart of the Agreed Framework and on which the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) had been set up to construct were too dangerous. In effect, the Bush administration effectively denounced the work of the Clinton administration.³¹ The September 2005 six-party-talks agreement did mention the reactors, purportedly as a compromise between the Bush administration that wanted them eliminated and the North Koreans who insisted they be included; but the timing is in dispute. The right wing of the Republican Party, which the Bush administration regards as essential to its continuing success, has during the past decade first predicted the collapse of the North, then believed that no negotiation should take place with a member of the “axis of evil” because they were completely untrustworthy, and then supported the position of the United States and the Korean Christian right on issues of human rights in North Korea. Right-wing Republicans were against the Agreed Framework.

South Korea has sought to assuage the North and has vigorously opposed any U.S. plan for a surgical military strike against any North Korean nuclear facility, assuming that would be technically possible. Although many within the Roh circle probably are not concerned about North Korean nuclear capacity because they feel the North would never use such weapons against the South, the Roh administration has indicated that it too wants a nuclear-free peninsula. At the same time, it has offered rice, fertilizer, and assistance in supply of electricity should North Korea agree to a nuclear freeze and international safeguards against the development of nuclear weapons and their proliferation through sales abroad. Because North Korea has called for an end to food shipments under the auspices of the UN’s World Food Program (WFP), with its more intrusive monitoring, and has claimed it gets enough food from China and South Korea with their minimal monitoring, some have called for South Korean shipments to take place under the auspices of a monitoring organization such as the WFP (Lim 2005).

The Roh administration has also attempted to continue appropriate relations with the United States. This has been apparent in the dispatch of combat troops to Iraq although there has been much disquiet over the role and potential use of the remaining U.S. forces in the ROK and whether they could be redeployed elsewhere without South

31. This may be interpreted as part of Bush’s “ABC policy”—anything but Clinton—pervasive in Washington.

Korean approval, a position that the United States will also deny. Another point of acute disagreement is Plan 5029, which is an attempt to develop an approach in case the North collapses. The United States has insisted that its military forces play a role in the occupation of the North, while this is strongly disputed by the South Koreans.

Changing the structure of government. President Roh is on record as vowing to try to change the administration of the state, and he seems to have advocated a constitutional amendment for a new power structure. In the past he has publicly but obscurely indicated that he might not serve out his term of office. There have been discussions about changing the presidential term of office, election dates, and patterns of representation. These various suggestions are titularly designed to eliminate regionalism and vituperative factional debate, but any of them seem to be ineffectual, if not quixotic, efforts to change the Korean political climate, which is deeply embedded in patron-client relationships and in entourage policies that will be transformed only after considerable periods of time.

VI. Implications for the U.S. Alliance

The new policies of South Korea represent significant differences with the United States and are unlikely to disappear even if a more conservative administration is elected. Although President Roh cannot run again, he may try to ensure that his policies remain in effect, but there will likely be tension between his (and his party's) need to assure his base of support (including youth and liberals) and his need to deal realistically with the United States. His approval rating is at this writing very low (about 30 percent), and he has already alienated a large segment of his core support group. He has, in a sense, been caught between his youthful, progressive supporters who want a more autonomous foreign policy and his perceived need to continue good relations with the United States. However his administration ends, the social changes (in contrast with any specific policy) that we have witnessed are unlikely to be reversed by any new (or old) group coming to power. The United States will have to contend with a new South Korea and needs to be prepared to do so in its own national interests.

The Roh administration has also been using the anti-Japanese sentiment that is latent in Korean society in efforts to purge the South of residual influences and of those who might have benefited from the Japanese colonial occupation. Poor relations with Japan, always at risk over the sovereignty of Dokdo (Takeshima) Island, the treatment of Japan's occupation in Japanese textbooks, and the comfort women issue, may not be assuaged by Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi's apology to Korea and China on 15 August 2005, although it was a clear statement made on a very significant day. Relatively smooth relations between Korea and Japan are of significance in any U.S. strategy in Northeast Asia. President Roh indicated that he would not use issues concerning

Japan for political purposes, but he (or his administration) seems to have done so.³² The Japanese had considered the improvement in Korean relations under the Kim Dae-jung administration an important contribution, but that optimism seems to have been lost. The current policies of the Roh administration and the group around President Roh may cause continuing suspicion in Korean-Japanese relationships, a situation that should be of concern to the United States because of U.S. reliance on Japan as the linchpin of U.S. policy in Northeast Asia, a reliance that in itself is galling to the Koreans.

As the United States is stretched thin in Iraq, as Iran appears more bothersome to the Bush administration, and as public frustration in the United States with the Iraq War and loss of life grows, pressures for redeployment of U.S. troops from Korea will likely increase. South Koreans have felt they were informed, not consulted, on previous redeployments, and they have been stung by these unilateral decisions. This unease may be more a product of a loss of face for a Korean administration than fears of a North Korean attack, but there are important implications related to the continuation of anti-U.S. sentiment, which continues to be profoundly important in spite of denials from both governments and the lack of any immediate and inflammatory incidents. In effect, the United States may be alienating just those more conservative elements of Korean society who have looked to the protective shield of the alliance. In spite of an immediate absence of incidents that spike anti-U.S. sentiment, this writer believes there is a “stealth curve” of rising and latent anti-U.S. sentiment that should not be ignored.³³ A poll among South Korean youth that indicated that two-thirds would fight for North Korea if there were a war between the DPRK and the United States should give the United States pause. Whatever the accuracy of such a survey, which may well be overblown—emotions that determine such survey responses in Korea are quite mercurial—this is a sentiment that should not simply be ignored.

U.S.-ROK relations will increasingly be seen as part of U.S.-China relations, and Korean attitudes toward both will be important. The ROK currently is having a love affair with China that transcends the obvious and increasingly important economic

32. President Roh Moo-hyun, in an interview with a number of Americans (including this author) at the Blue House in June 2002, indicated that he would not employ anti-Japanese sentiment for political purposes.

33. Anti-U.S. sentiment should not be equated with “anti-Americanism,” which is a total denial of a people and a state. One can admire various aspects of U.S. society, such as the educational system, but adamantly disapprove of U.S. policies or roles.

relations, including investment and trade.³⁴ The number of high schools teaching the Chinese language doubled in about a year to more than 400, and when the avian flu hit Beijing, the press reported that some 10,000 Korean students returned home. But those Koreans who recognize that the U.S. alliance is in their interest because it enables South Korea to avoid too close an entanglement with the Scylla of China or the Charybdis of Japan need to pay heed to rising U.S. nationalism since 9/11 and the sensitivities of the U.S. public and administration. But Korea is not completely focused on either China or the United States

The United States must recognize these planned social changes in South Korean political and social circles have created a new dynamic in the alliance and that past patterns of interaction will no longer suffice to maintain the relationship; indeed, they will cause it to deteriorate. These new patterns are likely to continue to be important, and there is a clear danger to the ROK-U.S. alliance over time if the United States does not respond with sensitivity to the new paradigm of South Korean politics that will be more critical, more self-assertive, and more nationalistic. Yet it is in the interests of both states to ensure close cooperation not only for both countries but for the region as well.

34. This in spite of claims by Chinese researchers that the ancient kingdom of Koguryo (one of the classic three kingdoms of Korea) that controlled much of what today is part of Manchuria and the northern part of the Korean peninsula was Chinese. Some have interpreted this as an attempt to assert historic Chinese control over what is now North Korea should that state collapse.

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