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AFTER SOUTH KOREA'S ELECTIONS, RECONCILIATION IS THE NEXT STEP TOWARD DEMOCRACY

(Updating Asian Study Center *Background* No. 64, "Confronting Political Change in South Korea," June 2, 1987.)

A new political era is dawning in the Republic of Korea. Last week's South Korean presidential election may be the country's most significant progress in political development since its formation in 1948. As the result of a fair and open electoral process, witnessed by many international observers including the authors of this paper, President-elect Roh Tae Woo, nominee of the ruling Democratic Justice Party, will be sworn in next February 26. This will mark the first peaceful transfer of executive power in South Korean history. Also inaugurated on that day will be a new and more democratic constitution drafted by all the major political parties.

Now that South Koreans have demonstrated that they can conduct honest elections, the next test for the country's fledgling democracy is for the defeated candidates--mainly Kim Young Sam of the Reunification Democratic Party and Kim Dae Jung of the Peace and Democracy Party--to show their readiness to concede peacefully. Both Kims have been charging, without producing proof, that the government rigged the election. Initially both Kims hinted that they might organize street demonstrations to show their opposition, but there have been increasing indications that both may soon accept the judgment of their countrymen.

Dramatic Turnaround. That the election proceeded peacefully was a change from the turbulent days of last June when hordes of often violent street demonstrators called for constitutional revision and a direct presidential election. They claimed that the existing indirect electoral college system was unfair. Roh Tae Woo, head of the ruling party, bowed to the pressure and on June 29 accepted virtually all the opposition demands. Within weeks the national legislature passed the new law that covered last week's election. It also approved the new constitution.

On election eve, December 15, most Korean and foreign observers believed that the race was too close to call. It turned out not to be close at all. Roh won 36 percent of the vote, with Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung trailing with 27 and 26 percent respectively. Minor candidates accounted for the remaining votes. Roh's margin of victory was nearly two million of the 23 million votes cast. To be sure, there were isolated instances of voting irregularities ranging from allegations of vote buying to intimidation of official poll watchers. Charges have been leveled at both government and opposition camps. The Kims have not, however, offered firm evidence to substantiate their claims of "massive election fraud."

In keeping with the election law drafted by all major political parties, the election process was protected by an elaborate system of checks and balances. Observers from competing political parties were present at all stages of the election, from vote casting to ballot counting. An official of the U.S. embassy in Seoul commented on the day before the vote that "election procedures are very tight" and any "significant fraud would be highly vulnerable to exposure."

No Evidence of Fraud. Reminiscent of international interest in last year's Filipino election, at least four U.S. observer teams traveled to South Korea. None of the American groups, including that sponsored by the pro-opposition Council for Democracy in Korea, reported any compelling proof of widespread election rigging. This was mirrored by comments to the Congress by Assistant Secretary of State Gaston Sigur that there is "no evidence of systematic fraud" and that the South Korean election "appears to have been conducted in an open and orderly manner." This position has received bipartisan congressional support, including that of the Chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, Stephen Solarz, the New York Democrat.

The next step in building South Korean democracy must be reconciliation and compromise by the three main candidates. President-elect Roh already has said that he is ready to start reconciliation talks with opposition leaders. The ability of all sides to cooperate will be tested in early 1988 when a new election law must be written for upcoming National Assembly elections.

Challenges Ahead. Future elections are just one of many challenges facing the new government. Others include resolving the growing trade friction with the U.S. and seeking to improve relations with North Korea, which continues to pose a real military threat. Possible North Korean involvement in the destruction near Thailand of Korean Air flight 858 on November 29 reminds all South Koreans of the potential danger from the North. Also of great national importance are the upcoming 1988 Seoul Summer Olympic Games.

Washington can help its Korean ally by continuing its hands-off policy toward South Korean domestic politics. Koreans themselves are meeting the challenge of democratization. The Reagan Administration was wise to ignore the handful of liberal members of Congress who earlier this year proposed drastic U.S. measures against Seoul, including economic sanctions, to force South Korean democratic reforms. What the U.S. must do is to continue urging both sides to reconcile their differences. This would ensure that South Koreans continue making progress in the political arena commensurate with their impressive economic success. A more democratic South Korea would enhance its already close ties with the U.S. and also contribute to Asian stability.

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The authors were part of the National Republican Institute for International Affairs delegation that visited South Korea December 14 through December 18. In addition to observing polling and vote counting on election day, the delegation met with political party representatives, government officials, and private citizens.