

KIM YOUNG SAM'S ELECTION SIGNALS HOPE FOR KOREAN DEMOCRACY

On December 18, citizens of the Republic of Korea (ROK) elected as their next president Kim Young Sam, leader of the Democratic Liberal Party. This advances South Korea's ongoing democratization, a process begun by the last presidential election in 1987. Before joining ranks with the ruling party two years ago, Kim led opposition forces against a succession of military-backed governments. Upon his inauguration on February 25, he will become the ROK's first elected civilian leader since 1961. His election also means that the new administration in Seoul will follow a path of stability and continuity, a prospect that bodes well not only for the Northeast Asian region but also for the future of U.S.-ROK relations.

Kim received about 42 percent of the vote, while his long-time rival, opposition leader Kim Dae Jung, trailed with around 34 percent of the total. Five other minor party candidates divided up the balance of the votes cast. Conceding defeat, Kim Dae Jung acknowledged the election's fairness and announced his retirement from politics. Incumbent President Roh Tae Woo was barred from running by the ROK constitution's single-term limit. The new Korean President-elect's mandate is considered a strong one. Roh, who defeated "the two Kims" in 1987, garnered just 36 percent of the vote in a similarly crowded field.

President-elect Kim's Record. Kim Young Sam was elected to the National Assembly in 1954. He was 26 years old then, and still holds the record as Korea's youngest national lawmaker. He has been reelected to the Assembly eight times -- another national record. In the late 1960s, he emerged as an opposition leader and proponent of democracy. During his years of struggle against authoritarianism, he was arrested, expelled from the legislature, and for five years in the early 1980s, banned from politics by the government. But Roh Tae Woo, then ruling party head, enacted historic reforms in 1987 that created a new, democratic constitution and allowed for free elections. Roh defeated Kim for the presidency that year, but Kim emerged as a powerful national figure. In early 1990, Roh and Kim merged their respective political parties, creating the new Democratic Liberal Party.

As a leader of the ROK's largest political party, Kim Young Sam bolstered the Roh Administration's efforts to expand Korean democracy, ease tensions with communist North Korea, expand the ROK's diplomatic network, promote free trade, and maintain domestic economic growth. It is an impressive record that also has strengthened the U.S.-ROK alliance, enhanced the image and understanding of Korea among Americans, and bolstered the ROK's clout and stature throughout the world.

Foreign and Domestic Challenges. Seoul's Northern Policy Initiative, unveiled in 1988, has been a resounding success and — in improving Seoul's ties with the socialist world — helped to hasten the end of the Cold War. The ROK has over the past four years forged new ties with more than forty governments. The tense Cold War standoff with the Russians and the Chinese has ended, giving way to friendly ties with both former adversaries. President Roh's September visit to the PRC and Russian President Boris Yeltsin's November trip to Seoul have inaugurated a new and hopeful era in Northeast Asian relations.

Still, leaders in Seoul, Washington and other world capitals remain concerned about the continuing threat posed by North Korea. The North maintains a massive and well-armed military poised along its border with the ROK. More ominously, the North so far has refused to allow for adequate inspection of its nuclear facilities and is believed by many to be developing nuclear weapons.

But, as the environment around the Peninsula improves, so do the prospects for a reduction in tensions and Korean reunification. With the end of the Cold War, the North is under increasing pressure to moderate its policies. Washington strongly has supported Seoul's initiatives at the North-South bargaining table. Furthermore, the U.S. has credited Seoul with skillful negotiating that resulted in recent agreements on reconciliation and denuclearization. While many challenges remain, the gains made in recent years are encouraging.

Democracy has created new domestic challenges for Korea. The ROK government has faced accelerated labor and social welfare demands domestically and competitiveness challenges abroad. Yet annual gross national product and per capita income growth rates have remained at levels that are the envy of other nations. At the same time, the Seoul government has moved to open wider many of the ROK's markets to foreign businesses.

Challenges for the New Kim and Clinton Administrations. President-elect Kim will be sworn in just a few weeks after Bill Clinton's inauguration. As President-elect Clinton's foreign policy advisors examine U.S. policy toward the Korean Peninsula, they should consider the following challenges:

◆ **North Korea's nuclear threat.** The new U.S. and South Korean administrations should continue their multilateral campaign, together with Tokyo, Moscow, and Beijing, to prevent the North from developing nuclear weapons. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) has conducted limited inspections of several research and power generating facilities in the North. On a separate track, Seoul and Pyongyang have signed a pact calling for reciprocal inspections within both the North and South. In subsequent negotiations, though, Pyongyang has refused to allow for agreement on a mutual inspection regime, and wrongly accuses the ROK and the U.S. of impeding talks. Troubled by a sagging economy and increasingly isolated from the international mainstream, the North recently has stepped up its calls for expanded political and economic exchanges with the West. But, until the Pyongyang leadership allows for adequate inspections of its nuclear facilities, Washington should not upgrade ties with North Korea

◆ **America's security commitment.** Although Washington recently has withdrawn some of the U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, about 36,000 American soldiers remain in the ROK. President-elect Clinton wisely has backed the Bush Administration's policy of maintaining this troop presence until the North Korean threat is lifted.

◆ **Promoting trade.** Annual trade between the U.S. and South Korea amounts to about \$40 billion, making the ROK America's sixth largest economic partner. Furthermore, in contrast to past years when the U.S. suffered from a sizable deficit with the ROK, America's trade account with South Korea currently is in balance. This is due in large part to Roh administration policies that advanced Korea's schedule of economic liberalization. President-elect Kim has pledged to continue these policies, and the Clinton Administration should work closely with Seoul to protect and expand business opportunities for Americans in the ROK. It also should be noted that South Korea represents a manufacturing and distribution springboard for reaching other markets in the Pacific Rim.

South Korea today stands as an influential diplomatic and trading power on the world stage. The U.S.-ROK alliance has shifted from one of patronage to one of full partnership. Americans and Koreans share many basic ideals and institutions, including their embrace of democracy and free market capitalism. Kim Young Sam's election promotes these shared ideals, offering the new Clinton Administration an opportunity to improve America's already close ties with this important Asian ally.

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