

# Web Memo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 1103  
June 2, 2006

## Local Elections in the ROK: What It Means for the U.S.

*Balbina Y. Hwang, Ph.D.*

In nationwide local elections held on May 31 in South Korea, the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) achieved an overwhelming victory. It won 11 of 16 provincial governor and major city mayor seats, including Seoul's, by a large margin. The ruling Uri Party's resounding defeat is a setback for President Roh Moo Hyun who has been struggling with low approval ratings and widespread public discontent. But, while it may be tempting for Roh's critics to view these election results as a rebuke of his leadership, particularly in the foreign policy arena, South Korea's orientation towards North Korea and the United States is unlikely to change dramatically.

These elections, for approximately 3,860 local administrative officials and councilors, were considered to be a public barometer of President Roh's progressive government and the Uri Party, in anticipation of next year's presidential elections. Roh Moo Hyun is limited by the law to one single five-year presidential term. The Korean public has become increasingly dissatisfied with the Roh government's social reform measures, as well as its policies that support reconciliation with North Korea, greater equality in relations with the United States, and increased animosity toward Japan. The conservative GNP, while maintaining majority

power in the National Assembly, had seen the elections as an opportunity to regain popular mandate for their positions.

The GNP's success was not unexpected, but the extent of its victory, not only in the number of gained seats but by an almost two-to-one margin in many cases, deals a serious blow to the President and his Uri Party, which will have to restructure in the wake of its loss. The Uri's defeat presents an opportunity to regroup and regain credibility before the December 2007 presidential race and national elections in April 2008. During this process, however, infighting both within the party and with the opposition is likely to become nastier, which will only further polarize the political process. The extent of viciousness during the campaigns was evident in the brutal physical attack on Park Geun-hye, the head of the GNP, by a drunken assailant who slashed Park's face with a knife.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
<http://www.heritage.org/research/AsiaandthePacific/wm1103.cfm>

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002-4999  
(202) 546-4400 · heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Now that the GNP has received a strong boost from the public, its responsibility to present solid policy alternatives to the ruling Uri Party has also increased. As Prime Minister Goh Kun observed, “[T]he election results should be seen as the ruling Uri party’s complete defeat, rather than as a GNP victory.” The opportunities, however, to meet popular expectation for a sea change in the nation’s political landscape should not be overestimated.

The democratic process in South Korea, while having made astounding progress in just a mere decade, is still maturing. During such periods of transformation, degrees of instability and uncertainty are natural and expected. Moreover, the Korean public is also in the process of finding its voice and learning about responsible political participation.

Rapid technological advances have affected the democratic process and the public’s participation in it. The widespread use of the Internet—South Korea is one of the most “wired” societies in the world in terms of broadband access—and the proliferation of other less traditional forms of media have dramatically altered information dissemination. These new outlets have allowed political leaders to manipulate public sentiments, often in irresponsible ways. For example, nationalism is often used by promoting anti-American or anti-Japanese sentiment.

As South Korea becomes “freer,” views on controversial issues—such as how to resolve North Korea’s nuclear threat and the future of the alliance with the United States—have grown more diverse. With the Roh Moo Hyun government determined to pursue its own policy of reconciliation with the North regardless of public skepticism, Washington must be prepared to address increasingly vocal and public criticism of the United States and its policies. The Bush administration’s maintenance of a strong stance against North Korea is unfortunately

misperceived by some as being at odds with Korean national interests and goals. Nothing is further from the truth. Like Koreans, Americans do not desire war on the Korean peninsula and prefer a peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. It is absolutely in U.S. short and long-term interests to promote peace, stability and a prosperous future on the peninsula.

As the pendulum of political power in Korea swings back and forth, the United States should be mindful that the ensuing cacophony of clashing opinions and public debate is actually in fact a positive result of a virtuous development on the Southern half of the peninsula: a maturing democracy. Washington’s challenge will be to find a way to work together with both sides of the political spectrum to encourage responsible outcomes that serve the mutual interests of both countries.

*Balbina Y. Hwang, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst for Northeast Asia in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.*