

# President impeached as South Korean democracy unravels

By James Conachy  
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South Korea has been plunged into a constitutional crisis by the March 12 impeachment of President Roh Moo-hyun. Not prepared to wait for another election, Roh's opposition in the Grand National Party (GNP) and Millennium Democratic Party (MDP) have used their two-thirds majority in parliament to try and end his presidency just 13 months into his five-year term of office.

Roh is the first Korean president to ever be successfully impeached. The trigger was the president's February 25 comment that he would support, "within the limits of the law", the newly formed Uri Party in the upcoming April 15 parliamentary elections. The GNP—a political formation whose origins lie in the pro-US military dictatorships that ruled the country until 1987—alleged the comment was a violation of Korean electoral law. Government officials, including the president, are prohibited from trying to influence election outcomes.

The MDP, formerly Roh's party and once considered "anti-GNP," played the crucial role in bringing on the impeachment. Roh resigned from the party last August after it supported a series of corruption allegations that were being used by the GNP to destabilise his administration. The MDP split in September, with a faction breaking away to form the Uri Party, on a platform of supporting Roh's economic and foreign policies. The MDP rump has since aligned itself with the GNP against the president.

The Election Commission issued a statement on March 3 that while Roh's remark was "not a serious breach," it would "strongly ask the President to stand neutral in elections." The MDP demanded Roh publicly apologise and declare his neutrality in the elections. When he refused, the GNP and MDP combined to move the impeachment motion, adding long-standing charges of electoral financing impropriety and administrative incompetence to the alleged breach of the electoral law. Out of the 273 legislators in the National Assembly, 193 voted for, more than the required two-thirds majority.

One Korean analyst commented to the *Washington Post*: "It's like shooting someone for minor theft."

The fate of Roh's administration now lies in the hands of a nine-member Constitutional Court, all scions of the legal hierarchy, which has up to 180 days to make a decision. If six judges find him guilty, new presidential elections must be held within 60 days, in which Roh would be barred from standing. Until then, all the executive powers of the presidency, including command of the armed forces, have been assumed by Prime Minister Goh Kun.

The opposition parties badly miscalculated, however, if they believed there would be no popular backlash against their actions. The reaction to the impeachment among millions of South Koreans, who lived under an overt dictatorship until just 17 years ago, has been an outpouring of anger, disgust and disbelief, particularly over the role of

the MDP.

While Roh's popularity plummeted during the course of his first year in office, the impeachment is legitimately being interpreted as an anti-democratic grab for power by the ex-generals and technocrats in the GNP. Thousands of people have taken part in demonstrations calling for the defence of democracy. At least one man has self-immolated in protest. The latest opinion polls for the April 15 elections show a substantial increase in support for the pro-Roh Uri Party. A poll cited by the latest issue of *BusinessWeek* has Uri with 53.8 percent support, compared to just 15.7 percent for the GNP and only 4.4 percent for the MDP. When it was formed, Uri polled less than 20 percent.

The April 15 election is likely to produce a massive repudiation of the GNP and MDP. It is also questionable whether the impeachment charges against Roh will be upheld by the Constitutional Court. Kim Jong Cheol, a constitutional lawyer, told the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: "The National Assembly does not have the legal evidence to bring this case."

The actions of the GNP and MDP have a desperate and even reckless character. Their willingness to carry out an impeachment on such spurious grounds is an expression of just how deep the hostility is toward Roh's administration in ruling circles. The determination to bring Roh down is bound up with his program, the circumstances of his election and its impact on the Bush administration's attitude toward the South Korean government.

Like former president Kim Dae-jung, Roh speaks for the layers of the Korean elite who were sidelined from power and privilege under the former dictatorship. This faction resents the traditional domination of the US over the country, seeing it as the major prop for the financial oligarchy connected to the GNP. Steeped in Korean nationalism, they advocate greater distance from the US and closer economic and political relations with the North.

Trailing the GNP in the polls in 2002, Roh made the decision to try and come to office with populist appeals to the pervasive anti-US and anti-business sentiment that exists in the Korean working class.

The restructuring since the 1997-1998 Asian economic crisis has dramatically heightened social and class tensions. South Korea's poverty rate has doubled in the last six years, with 20 percent of the population now living in or close to poverty. Some one million people are officially unemployed. The unemployment rate for persons aged 15 to 29 is still at a three-year high of 9.1 percent. Millions of Korean workers legitimately blame the US for directing the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to demand the type of restructuring and mass layoffs they have endured since 1997.

The Bush administration is viewed with particular hostility. Koreans

of all social classes had hopes in the “Sunshine Policy” toward North Korea that was proclaimed by Kim Dae-jung—for which he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Ordinary Koreans hoped it would lead to a détente with Pyongyang and end over 50 years of military tension. Business interests in Korea, as well as China, Russia and the European Union, hoped it would transform Korea into an economic hub between the west and east of Eurasia. Such expectations have been dashed by the Bush’s administration’s confrontational approach to the North.

Roh appealed to the mass sentiment against the threat of war by promising he would be “independent” of Washington and continue the Sunshine Policy. He particularly identified himself with the mass demonstrations just weeks before the vote against the acquittal of two American soldiers who were being tried for running over and killing two Korean schoolgirls. He also pledged measures to alleviate poverty and unemployment.

On the eve of the invasion of Iraq, Roh’s election was another expression of the global opposition to the militarism of the Bush administration. While Roh only won by a few percentage points, over 60 percent of South Koreans under 30 voted for him. His administration, however, has been regarded as untenable in the eyes of substantial sections of the ruling class.

Roh has been treated as something of a pariah by the Bush administration due to his anti-American rhetoric and overtures toward Pyongyang. His government has been essentially incapable of exerting any influence over US policy, under conditions where the Bush administration appears bent on provoking a confrontation with North Korea.

This was highlighted last year when Roh agreed to send 3,000 troops to join the occupation of Iraq with the expectation the US would, in return, tone down its insistence that the North unilaterally and “verifiably” dismantles its military and civilian nuclear programs. However, no US compromise has been forthcoming. In the latest rounds of talks, the White House repeated its demand.

While there is no evidence of direct US involvement in the impeachment, the US treatment of Roh has been a major factor in encouraging the GNP and MDP to act against him.

No significant faction of the South Korean elite wants war on the peninsula, which would have devastating economic and military consequences for the South—particularly if Seoul were destroyed by North Korean artillery. Even the current state of tension caused foreign investment to South Korea to slump 29 percent from 2002 to 2003. But under conditions where both Bush and Democrat candidate Kerry advocate no compromise with Pyongyang, the perspective considered most viable in the GNP is to align itself with the US. Their hope is that they can at least moderate US bellicosity, maintain the status quo and wait for the northern regime to utterly capitulate or, better, collapse.

The most right-wing sections of the GNP view Roh’s attempts to distance South Korea from the US as tantamount to treason. Elderly GNP legislator and former general Won Chung told the *Washington Post* on the day the president was impeached: “God saved our country from the Reds. Roh has been secretly trying to veer our country toward the communists in the North and away from our close ally, the United States.”

The other constituency encouraging the opposition parties to remove Roh has been Korean big business. Roh has met none of his promises to the poor. The corporate elite, however, is deeply concerned over the impact of his presidency on the working class. His government

has been viewed as susceptible to pressure from below. His attempts to carry out privatisations and enforce harsh labour laws have been met with strikes and demonstrations demanding he back down. There are ongoing strikes to try and claw back the wages and conditions workers lost during the 1997-1998 crisis. A record 322 industrial disputes in 2002 forced a 10 percent average increase in wages. The 320 strikes in 2003 nearly matched that level, and were triple the number in 1997.

This is taking place under conditions where Korea’s manufacturing export industries are expecting to come under challenge from competitors in China over the next few years. Korean companies themselves have already shed 700,000 manufacturing jobs since 1992, while at the same time creating over one million jobs in China, where wages are less than a tenth of the Korean average. The rollback of the conditions granted to workers in an earlier period is essential to South Korean capitalism remaining a player in world manufacturing production.

Whether Roh remains as president or not, the processes leading to the impeachment have a logic of their own. Just 17 years after abandoning direct military rule, the ruling elite in Korea is concluding that the trappings of democracy are an obstacle to their interests. In a highly significant move, the GNP elected Park Geun-hye as its new leader and presidential candidate on March 22. Park is the daughter of former dictator Park Chung-hee and an unabashed defender of the repression carried out under his rule.

The objective in impeaching Roh is to dramatically shift the policy of the state to the right. It is aimed at more closely aligning South Korea with the US against the North and, in particular, it is to clear the way for a sharp stepping up of the attacks on the working class. This will inevitably be accompanied by greater inroads in democratic rights.

The Korea Employers Federation—the main umbrella organisation for Korean big business with traditional links to the GNP—has already greeted the impeachment with a call for its members to impose a wages freeze on all workers in companies with more than 300 employees. It also called for the replacement of the present seniority-based wages scale to be replaced with one based on “performance,” and no further wage increases for employees after they pass the age of 50.

It is clear, however, that the agenda of the Korean ruling class will provoke bitter resistance. The 2002 election and the reaction to the impeachment are both indications of steadily rising militancy within the population against the attacks on living standards, the contempt for their democratic rights within the political establishment and the arrogance of US imperialism. The stage is set for an eruption of class conflict.

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