

[Analysis] Roh Moo-hyun era's end requires progressives to unite

Scholars say posture of broad-ranging solidarity needed despite progressive factions' distrust of Roh's left-wing neoliberalism and opposition to KORUS FTA



Beyond the paper cranes made by citizens for the late President Roh Moo-hyun, people can be seen waiting to pay their respects at Deoksugung Palace, May 28.

Former President Roh Moo-hyun had received enthusiastic support from civil society and progressives during his campaign for the presidency in 2002. Roh's five years in power, however, were marked by an ongoing conflict between him and progressives.

The early period of his administration following the 2003 inauguration was relatively trouble free. A number of individuals from civic groups had been tapped as Cheong Wa Dae (the presidential office in South Korea or Blue House) staff, including his adviser for personnel affairs, Jeong Chan-yong, and his senior secretary for public participation, Park Ju-hyeon. In the agenda for greetings and informal talks with figures from various sectors following the inauguration, senior figures from civil society were first on the list for invitations.

The real problems began in the fall of that year with the deployment of soldiers to Iraq. Progressives across the board, including human rights groups, expressed absolute opposition to unjustified participation in the war. They also urged Roh to

stay faithful to the principle of autonomous diplomacy with the U.S. that he had emphasized during his candidacy. Meanwhile, the conservative media and groups of foreign affairs and national defense bureaucrats paid close attention to his administration's choices, taking issue with how he chose to manage South Korea's national interests and the reality of South Korea-U.S. relations. An all-out confrontation ensued between progressive and conservative forces.

"At the time, President Roh was personally opposed to deploying troops," said Kim Byung-joon, a former Cheong Wa Dae senior policy secretary. "After agonizing about the reality of South Korea-U.S. relations, which were unable of being changed overnight, he made the decision for deployment in the end," Kim recalled. This decision caused progressives to begin to harbor a deep distrust of Roh, wondering if he had changed his mind after assuming power. Progressives's distrust was furthered deepened as bureaucratic groups and conservative media leaked information so that Roh would take a beating.

The gap between the two sides gradually widened over a variety of issues including the Saemangeum reclamation project, the screen quota and the financial industry law before reaching a head with the issue of the South Korea-U.S. free trade agreement (KORUS FTA). Members of civil society and progressives in academia repeatedly warned of the dangers that would result from rashly pursuing the KORUS FTA. In addition to concerns about damages to certain industries, they also cautioned against the possible Americanization of South Korea's legal system and values. In contrast, Roh was certain that the South Korean economy would take another leap forward with the KORUS FTA. The confrontation grew even more intense as differences in values and philosophy reared their heads. Former Cheong Wa Dae senior policy adviser and Kyungpook National University Professor Lee Joung-woo, former Presidential Secretary for Economic Affairs Chung Tae-in and former Secretary for Labor Affairs Park Tae-ju even left Roh's side to join an oppositional progressive faction.

As conflicts piled up, progressives began to directly criticize his identity and said Roh "turns on his left-turn signal and then makes a right." Roh's camp had responded by saying that the progressives "only engage in irresponsible criticism without helping" and "cannot read the changes in the world." In one discussion, Roh had asked emotionally, "What is wrong with left-wing neoliberalism?" Informal talks between Roh and leaders of civil society gradually turned into occasions for heated confrontations, ultimately resulting in the departure of the administration's support base, and the weakening and shrinking of the ranks in the civil society movement.

Problems in both Roh's camp and the civil society movement can be said to have contributed to fractures in Roh's support base. Professor Lee Nam-ju of SungKongHoe University points to errors in Roh's political strategy. Lee contends that the Roh administration's preliminary strategy of trying to actively mobilize progressives hit a wall with the railroad strike and Iraq deployments, after which, it switched to a strategy of attempting to broaden its support base with moderates and conservatives. Lee said the problem was that Roh's administration repeatedly brought up "unreasonable agenda items" like the KORUS FTA and the proposal of a

grand coalition in order to win over an opposition that could never become supporters, which merely produced negative consequences for Roh.

Analysts are also commenting that part of the problem also lies with progressives and in their choice to assume a hostile, rather than a critical position after Roh was elected. "The progressive faction can criticize, but they should have done it constructively and have left some breathing room. All they did was engage in this bloodthirsty, hostile criticism, saying 'You can just drop dead,'" said Professor Kim Gi-won of Korea National Open University. "As a result, President Roh had nowhere to lean on and was unable to accomplish anything. Progressives need to take responsibility for this."

Some are suggesting that the end of the "Roh Moo-hyun era" means that progressives need to establish a new course for the future. "The problem is that they fixate on exceedingly small differences. They need to distinguish between the trivial and the significant matters," said Park Sang-hoon, president of Humanitas publishing company. "South Korea's progressives have always lacked a posture of broad-ranging solidarity, so they have never been able to escape being a minority," Park remarked.

Quelle: **The Hankyoreh**