

Korea: It's Not the Bomb; It's the Funeral

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The latest North Korean nuclear test and missing launch continues to get headlines, but it is only another chapter in an already ongoing saga. For the United States, more important things happened on the Korean peninsula this week. The death and burial of former South Korean President Roh Moo-hyun are of deep concern. It is important to America that the aftermath goes well.

That President Roh was able to gain election to his five year term in 2002 was a shock to the Korean "system." He came from poverty, never went to college and passed the notoriously difficult bar exam through self study. As a lawyer he represented pro-democracy students, dissidents and labor activists in the stacked courts under successive military dictatorships. When free elections came to Korea in 1987 he went into politics. The feeling of pride among most Koreans, even those who didn't vote for him, that they had broken a political taboo by electing someone with modest means from outside the entrenched establishment was palpable and can be compared to the emotions most Americans felt at the election of Barack Obama.

As president, Roh embarked on a series of reforms and adjustments, including an anti-corruption drive. Many led to major changes for the better in Korea's society and economy. Among them was an attack on the abuse and arbitrariness of the powerful prosecutorial establishment, which still seemed to stack the deck against the little guy and in favor of the elite. Some of his more quixotic quests and an economic downturn led to a fall in the perception of Roh's governing competence by the end of his term, but never to his image as the champion of the underdog.

Among Roh's most vocal electoral supporters were those who proclaimed they were "anti-American" and claimed that the U.S.-Korean alliance propped up an elite establishment that institutionalized inequality and suppressed moves to unify Korea. Roh rejected those views, arguing that while the alliance may need modernization, it was a bedrock of Korean foreign policy and trade with the U.S. a key to the country's economic future. He sent Korean troops to Iraq and Afghanistan and personally initiated the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement,

breaking open many of Korea's closed industries to American competition (if the FTA is ratified).

Roh's successor, President Lee Myung Bak, represents Korea's more conservative party, which has portrayed itself as "rescuing" the alliance with the U.S. from tensions resulting from the modernization Roh had undertaken. But worse than that, prosecutors began an intense investigation of Roh's financial dealings and found that while he was in office his wife had persuaded a rich longtime friend to underwrite their children's education in the U.S. and invest in their son's business; in total about \$6.4 million. There is no indication the friend got anything in return. Roh was brought 280 miles from his rural retirement village to Seoul and questioned for thirteen hours straight. His children and loyal staff were also questioned and his wife was scheduled for the same grilling next week. Roh took his own life last Saturday, perhaps partly out of shame that his reform image had been stained, but also, according to his suicide note, to spare his wife, children and friends further suffering. He knew from experience that hounding, constant media leaks, and perhaps jail would all be forthcoming.

The Korean people know that Roh was targeted, and treated without the decorum due a former president, precisely because he had tried to reform prosecutorial abuse and taken on the entrenched establishment. Huge crowds attended Roh's funeral. There will be a strong, and probably lasting, reaction among the Korean public that will lead to changes in prosecutorial discretion and greater scrutiny of future prosecutorial investigations.

Let us hope Lee Myung Bak's government treats Roh's legacy with true "conservative" values – careful, sober, respectful – and does not react in a way that reminds the public of past authoritarianism. If it mishandles Roh's legacy, then its close public identification with the U.S. will play badly for the alliance and undermine much of the broadening of support for the alliance that Roh had accomplished.

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