

Obituary Roh Moo-hyun

Combative president of South Korea who became mired in a corruption scandal. By Aidan Foster-Carter
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Combative president of South Korea who became mired in a corruption scandal

Roh Moo-hyun, who has died aged 62, was a South Korean president who broke the mould – though in the end the mould broke him. His tenure of the Blue House (2003-08) antagonised the Seoul elite and Washington while disappointing his fans, many of whom shared his poor origins. Dismay grew as a corruption scandal enveloped him, finally driving him to jump from a cliff top near his home early on Saturday morning after leaving a suicide note in his computer.

Roh, the youngest child of a poor farmer, never lost his roots in Korea's rural south-east. His nickname was "stone bean": small but tough. Unable to afford college, he worked on building sites while studying at night for South Korea's formidable bar examination. Passing this in 1975 – a remarkable feat for a non-graduate – he was briefly a judge before practising as a lawyer.

In 1971 he had married his childhood sweetheart, Kwon Yang-sook; her father was once jailed as pro-communist. At first more upwardly mobile than political – with a comfortable tax practice, he joined the local yacht club – in 1980 Roh defended students tortured on trumped-up charges by Seoul's then military dictators. By his own account, the sight of torn-out toenails radicalised him. Now specialising in human rights cases, he was briefly jailed in 1987, the year democracy was restored. Elected to the national assembly for the port city of Pusan, he gained fame for grilling generals and tycoons in sessions broadcast on television. Such irreverence struck a fresh note in a country still in fear of the military and in awe of elites.

A spell in the wilderness followed. When his mentor Kim Young-sam allied with generals to win the presidency in 1993, a disgusted Roh threw in his lot with Kim Young-sam's rival, the long-time dissident Kim Dae-jung. Regional antagonism between the south-east and Kim Dae-jung's south-west made the latter a losing ticket in Pusan, but Roh doggedly ran and lost three times. His image as a principled if quixotic loser inspired his supporters to form Nosamo

(We Love Roh), South Korea's first ever political fan club, which blossomed with the internet.

Kim Dae-jung won the presidency in 1997, and Roh served briefly as fisheries minister. Yet he was still a political outsider when the ruling party decided to choose its next candidate – South Korean presidents serve a single five-year term – via the country's first primaries. To elite consternation, a bandwagon began to roll, delivering Roh the nomination. Insiders tried to deselect him; at one point he trailed third in the polls. But on the day, in December 2002, he narrowly defeated a stiff conservative former judge. Koreans wanted a change.

In office Roh proved divisive. The establishment hated him, and he them. Shunning, and at one point suing, the conservative print dailies, Roh favoured left-leaning online news sites such as OhmyNews. He promoted the radical "386 generation": in their 30s, at college in the 1980s and born in the 1960s. Populist and anti-American, the 386ers sounded a new assertive note. Roh himself unusually had never visited the US before (though he wrote a book about Abraham Lincoln) and answered his critics by saying he did not see why he should have gone just to kowtow.

But the left was soon disappointed. Roh sent troops to Iraq and in 2007 signed a free trade accord with the US, in the teeth of fierce street protests, a Korean speciality. If Iraq was a sop to President George Bush so that Roh could continue a "sunshine" policy of engaging North Korea, the trade agreement seemed a real change of heart, rejecting the old "fortress Korea" mentality.

Policies apart, Roh's style grated. His mouth tended to run away with him. This spontaneity, refreshing at first, was often combative and crude. He admitted that on official trips – including the first ever Korean state visit to the UK, in 2004 – he packed *ramyon* (instant noodles). Having no English small talk was a problem too: by the time the interpreter was summoned, the moment had passed.

At home Roh was forever upsetting apple carts, not least his own. Within weeks of becoming president, he wondered aloud if he were up to the job and suggested a referendum. In March 2004 he got one – as the first South Korean president ever to be impeached. A popular backlash in his favour then gave his party a majority in elections in April. In May the constitutional court threw out his impeachment. Roh, and Korea, recovered from an unnerving rollercoaster ride largely of his own making.

Thus it continued. In 2007, as his term drew to a close, after years of antagonising the right Roh startled friend and foe alike by proposing an alliance with the conservative opposition. They rejected it. Their candidate, Lee Myung-bak, a former Hyundai chief executive and mayor of Seoul, won a landslide in December 2007's presidential election – over a centre-left which, by then, was desperate to distance itself from Roh, seen as a bungling liability.

Scorning Seoul, Roh retired to a new house in his native village, where he grew organic rice, drank with the locals and blogged. In recent months this idyll darkened. A bribery scandal involving a Pusan shoemaker, Park Yeon-cha, was said to implicate Roh's family. On 7 April Roh admitted his wife took money from Park to settle a debt. On 30 April he was driven to Seoul for a grilling that lasted until the small hours. Amid rumours from a suspiciously leaky prosecutor's office that Roh solicited \$6m from Park, he feared indictment, humiliation and jail. His death has halted this; but the full truth may now never be known.

"Discard me," Roh wrote in his blog. For all his flaws, history will judge him less harshly than that. His very weakness helped democracy. No emperor, he delegated and did not abuse power markedly. The economy grew at a fair clip, even if he had no clear vision for it.

His finest hour came in October 2007. Solemnly walking across the Demilitarised Zone, he drove on to Pyongyang for a summit with leader Kim Jong-il, whose results belied low expectations, launching wide-ranging business deals with the north. For a few months the two Koreas met daily. Roh's successor, Lee, junked all this, just as in 2003 Bush brusquely ditched Bill Clinton's outreach to North Korea.

An odd mix of Candide-like innocence and often misplaced guile, Roh could be a fool. Yet he was a breath of fresh air, and his street-smart instincts did not lack vision. His end is a tragedy, for him and for Korea.

He is survived by his wife and their son and daughter.

Roh Moo-hyun, politician, born 6 August 1946; died 23 May 2009