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**The Impact of Korean Local Elections**by William Drennan**Summary**

For the first time since the 1961 military coup, South Koreans went to the polls on June 27th to elect provincial governors, mayors and other local officials in what was widely seen as both a mid-term assessment of President Kim Young Sam and as the opening shot in the battle for the Blue House--up for grabs in 1997 at the expiration of Kim's five-year term. The results of the June local autonomy elections have dramatically altered the Republic of Korea (ROK) political landscape. The elections produced a new generation of political leaders while setting the stage for one final clash of the titans of the old guard, the "three Kims"--Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Pil. The results demonstrate both the promise and the limitations of Korean democracy, and have important policy implications for the United States.

**Election Results**

While the campaign season was not devoid of controversy--for example, in a successful effort to prevent the ruling Democratic Liberal Party (DLP) from passing a proposal to postpone the elections, opposition Democratic Party (DP) members held the National Assembly speaker and vice speaker captive in their own homes for a week--the elections were largely devoid of the widespread fraud, corruption and violence that have marred previous plebiscites. Opposition candidates showed that they could not only compete against, but actually defeat ruling party candidates in head-to-head competition. The elections marked the end of the era in which all local officials were appointed by the central government in Seoul. And, while the elections were for local offices, their impact has reverberated throughout the Republic and has altered the national political balance of power.

The results were a major blow to President Kim Young Sam, and while they may not have rendered him a lame duck, his stature has clearly been diminished even before the midpoint in his constitutionally mandated single five-year term. Of the top 15 prizes--the provincial gubernatorial and major city mayoral slots--President Kim's Democratic Liberal Party captured only five (the governors' posts in Kyonggi and North and South Kyongsang provinces and the mayors' positions in Pusan and Incheon.)

The Democratic Party, with which Kim Dae Jung has been closely allied even though he had officially retired from politics following his defeat in the 1992 presidential race, captured the "jewel in the crown," the mayor's slot in Seoul. The DP also won in Kim Dae Jung's strongholds of North and South Cholla

provinces and the city of Kwangju.

The United Liberal Democratic Party--founded in March by Kim Jong Pil--made an impressive debut, winning the mayor's office in Taejon and the gubernatorial posts in Kangwon as well as North and South Chungchong provinces. (Independents won in the city of Taegu and on the island of Cheju.)

### **Democracy in Action**

While the immediate effect of the DLP's drubbing was to breathe new life into the political careers of Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Pil, the elections also propelled a new generation of political leaders onto the national scene. These rising stars are building their political bases from the grassroots up, and if a sampling of victory speeches is representative, they know who put them in office and whom they have to satisfy to remain there. They are attuned to their constituents, less beholden to the older generation of autocratic party leaders, and largely devoid of ties to the old military-dominated power structure. There were other hopeful signs as well.

The media, increasingly free of governmental controls since 1987, served as both the principal source of information for the voters (TV coverage, including candidate debates, largely supplanted mass campaign rallies as major media events), and as a watchdog over the process, exposing--and thereby helping to scuttle--various attempts to manipulate the process for partisan advantage. The media demonstrated an independence, objectivity and maturity which had previously been in short supply.

Finally, perhaps of even greater importance than what happened in the campaign was what did not happen. The two groups which have so roiled ROK politics in the past--students and the military--remained on the sidelines. Voting booths have replaced street demonstrations as outlets for popular political participation, and the resulting social stability has removed any pretext for the military to meddle in politics. As a result, the violent, telegenic confrontations between firebomb-throwing university students and tear gas-firing, riot police backed by army troops were absent from the campaign. Even the Agency for National Security Planning--the old KCIA--appears to have largely sat out the elections.

These positive aspects suggest that South Korea, with its expanding middle class, continues to close the gap between its robust economic institutions and its here-to-fore anemic political institutions. There is no guarantee, however, that the gap will continue to be narrowed; other, far less positive, aspects of the elections are a reminder of just how far the ROK has to go to become a mature democracy.

### **Three Kims Redux**

Kim Young Sam, Kim Dae Jung, and Kim Jong Pil have alternated between being blood rivals and political allies over the years, each playing a major role in South Korea's tumultuous politics since the early 1960s. But the "Era of the Three Kims" was thought to have ended with Kim Dae Jung's retirement from politics following his defeat by Kim Young Sam in the 1992 presidential election. To the extent that the June 1995 elections were a mid-term assessment of President Kim's leadership, however, the poor showing of his DLP has positioned Kim Dae Jung and Kim Jong Pil for one last hurrah.

To a certain extent, Kim Young Sam has only himself to blame. In an example of the score settling that has been a leitmotif of his administration, President Kim, in his capacity as head of the ruling DLP, cashiered Kim Jong Pil as party chairman in January. If the intent was to drive a stake in the heart of Kim Jong Pil's long political career, the move clearly backfired. Kim Jong Pil and his followers

promptly withdrew from the DLP and formed the United Liberal Democratic Party (ULDP). The ULDP's success in June came at the expense of the DLP and put the DLP, the ULDP and the opposition Democratic Party in a virtual dead heat in the closely watched contests for the 15 top positions described above. As a result, Kim Young Sam suffered a major embarrassment, Kim Jong Pil got a new lease on political life, and Kim Dae Jung got the opening he was seeking for a return to politics. Within days of the election, Kim Dae Jung announced his "unretirement," broke from the DP, and formed his own party, the National Congress for New Politics (NCNP).

### **Drags on Democracy**

Thus the stage is set for a final confrontation between the three Kims, men whose quest for power exemplifies the debilitating impact that regional prejudices, weak political parties, and autocratic leadership style have had on the quest for democracy in South Korea.

That intense regional rivalry remains the dominant force in ROK politics was confirmed in the June elections wherein no political party demonstrated a true national following. If anything, antagonisms based on geography were exacerbated as each of the three Kims "played the region card." The predictable result was that each Kim (or, more precisely, each Kim's party) carried his native provinces and little else.

In South Korea, where all politics are regional, political parties are largely the creations of--and vehicles for the personal ambitions of--political leaders whose appeal rarely extends beyond their home provinces. The political landscape is littered with the carcasses of defunct parties as alliances are continually formed and reformed based on calculations of temporary advantage by opportunistic politicians. Again, the events surrounding the June local autonomy elections are only the most recent examples. In the space of seven months the Democratic Liberal Party, formed in 1990, has been shattered, spawning the United Liberal Democratic Party; and the Democratic Party, formed in 1991, has been rendered a hollow shell by the desertion of Kim Dae Jung and the formation of the NCNP.

In a country where the rule of law remains tenuous and losers have tended to suffer at the hands of the winners, political victory in South Korea has carried an added imperative largely absent in mature democracies. The zero-sum nature of ROK politics has tended, however, to mask the reality of a severely constrained political spectrum. Few substantive differences have existed between major parties and candidates in a country where anti-communism has been the state ideology. With little real competition of ideas in the political marketplace, South Korean politics has become primarily a competition for personal power. Examples abound:

- Neither Kim Young Sam nor Kim Dae Jung, long allied in their opposition to the military regimes that ruled Korea since 1961, would drop out of the 1987 presidential race in favor of the other, thereby splitting the opposition vote and throwing the election to the hated Chun Doo Hwan's handpicked successor, General Roh Tae Woo.
- Later, in a successful effort to isolate Kim Dae Jung and position himself to capture the presidency in 1992, Kim Young Sam joined his arch enemies--Kim Jong Pil and Roh Tae Woo, the architects of the 1961 and 1979/80 military coups respectively--to form the DLP in 1990.
- Having suffered under--and railed against--the draconian National Security Law during his decades as an opposition leader, Kim Young Sam has chosen to retain the measure now that he is in the Blue House.
- Kim Jong Pil, the father of the dreaded KCIA, and Kim Dae Jung, kidnapped and nearly murdered by the KCIA in the 1970s, are the strangest of bedfellows in 1995 as they collaborate to further

weaken Kim Young Sam and the remnants of the DLP.

- The constitution and the basic form of government are considered fair game in the quest for power. Speculation is rampant that Kim Young Sam, fearful of being perceived a lame duck, will propose a constitutional amendment removing the restriction on a second presidential term. Both Kim Jong Pil and Kim Dae Jung have championed a constitutional amendment to change the form of the ROK government from a presidential to a parliamentary system. Each has apparently concluded that, given his inability to build a truly national following, his only hope of attaining power lies in becoming prime minister under a parliamentary system.

### **Implications for the United States**

The local autonomy elections demonstrate how far the ROK has come in establishing a viable democracy; just as clearly, they show how far it has to go. Politics in South Korea remains regionally oriented, confined to a narrow political spectrum, and dominated by autocratic party leaders. The "Era of the Three Kims" has not yet passed, but it is unlikely to survive beyond the 1997 presidential election (if for no other reason than that all three will be in their seventies.) What are the implications for United States policy?

- **South-North Relations:** American officials must take into account President Kim's political predicament as we attempt to ease tensions on the Korean peninsula, implement the October 1994 Agreed Framework, and foster meaningful South-North dialogue. The perception that the United States shunted aside South Korean interests in the negotiations leading to the Agreed Framework with North Korea embarrassed President Kim and tarnished his image as a leader who could protect ROK interests. The results of the June elections have weakened Kim further, constraining his ability to craft innovative policies, not to mention dramatic breakthroughs, regarding South-North relations.
- **Bilateral Issues:** Progress on contentious U.S.-ROK bilateral issues will be even more difficult than usual for the remainder of Kim's term. Domestic political considerations in the run-up to the 1996 National Assembly general elections and the 1997 presidential campaign will put a premium on standing up to the United States. Should the DLP lose its majority status in the National Assembly in the April 1996 elections, we can expect gridlock until at least the inauguration of a new president in early 1998.
- **Democratization:** A new generation of political leaders, too young to remember the Korean War and intensely nationalistic, has begun to emerge in South Korea. The United States needs to begin now to build relationships with them. The days when the United States could deal exclusively with a small coterie of largely Western-educated, English-speaking, right-wing elite are clearly over.

A "succession crisis" will exist for more than two years as the three Kims maneuver for advantage, with the constitution and the form of government subject to manipulation in the process. The United States must understand how its agenda will play in the ROK political milieu while ensuring that U.S. interests are not damaged in the process.

Finally, the United States must be prepared for a period of turbulence should the rosy assumptions about a united Korea being stable and democratic prove to be unfounded. Regional prejudices in the South could pale in comparison to the antagonism between the northern and southern halves of a reunited Korea, acting as a brake on both national reconciliation and continued democratization. The United States needs to continue to do all it can to foster democracy in the South in the interim so that a (peninsula-wide) ROK is better able to withstand the inevitable strains that reunification--whenever it comes--is sure to induce.

Republic of Korea Local Election Results	
Cities	Winning Party
Seoul	DP
Pusan	DLP
Taegu	Independent
Inchon	DLP
Kwangju	DP
Taejon	ULDP
Provinces	
Kyonggi	DLP
Kangwon	ULDP
N. Chungchong	ULDP
S. Chungchong	ULDP
N. Cholla	DP
S. Cholla	DP
N. Kyongsang	DLP
S. Kyongsang	DLP
Cheju	Independent

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