

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

24 December 1987

**South Korea's Presidential Transition:
The Tests for Roh Tae Woo [redacted]**

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Summary

Public acceptance of Roh Tae Woo's plurality win in the presidential election and disarray in the opposition have blunted allegations of government cheating and won South Korea's president-elect a "honeymoon" with most Koreans. However, Roh's actions in the next few months will be critical if he is to transfer this advantage into solid support. He must consolidate his position inside the ruling camp, make clear that he is proceeding to democratize the political system, and avoid actions that bring about a reunified opposition challenge. Most Koreans see Roh as holding de facto power, and they are certain to judge him on how the government performs in the weeks before 25 February, when President Chun leaves office. [redacted]

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Challenges for Roh

A key challenge for Roh in the days ahead will be to consolidate power in the Democratic Justice Party (DJP), a

This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] Office of East Asian Analysis. Information available as of 24 December 1987 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Korea Branch, Northeast Asia Division, OEA [redacted]

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process that is already under way. Roh's comfortable plurality-- and a weak political party system in South Korea--almost certainly will facilitate the effort, giving many who were his critics little choice but to follow him. Still, the ruling party has largely been Chun's personal machine, and Roh will need either to co-opt or to eliminate some Chun backers, including hardliners--mostly retired generals--who have viewed him as soft on leftists and disloyal to Chun. [redacted]

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The strong presidential powers Roh will inherit in February probably give him most of the cards he needs to consolidate his authority. Potential challengers would have to weigh the heavy odds against success, and the likelihood that Roh, once he assumes office, would strip them of any sinecures they may have received from Chun. [redacted]

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Still, Roh needs to proceed carefully. Because Chun is still President, a blurring in the lines of political authority could offer hardliners the chance to push their views rather than accede to Roh's leadership and presumed softer line. Public statements by Chun threatening a crackdown on radicals, along with US military intelligence reports that suggest the police initially saw Roh's win as license to return to tougher tactics, indicate some may regard Roh's victory as carte blanche to get tough with the opposition. [redacted]

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Given his political record in confronting his opponents and his well-documented inability to share power, Chun also could cause Roh trouble. Nevertheless, Chun appears to recognize that his future depends on his successor's decisions. [redacted]

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[redacted] the two men fell out during the presidential campaign, when Roh's public statements increasingly distanced him from Chun and his regime. [redacted]

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To bolster his standing outside the ruling camp, Roh must begin to deliver on his promise of political liberalization. He is already moving in this direction:

- In a conversation with US officials last week, Roh vowed to continue the moderate approach he took on a range of issues during the campaign, including some tolerance of dissent.
- In his postelection address, Roh promised to establish an advisory council of ruling and opposition party politicians to begin national reconciliation even before he takes office. [redacted]

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Rhetoric aside, Roh's first practical hurdle will come as early as next month, when he will need to propose a revised

National Assembly election law as promised during interparty negotiations last fall. Government officials have announced plans to hold legislative elections in early February. Talks between the ruling and opposition parties on a new law could begin by early January. [redacted]

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In our view, these negotiations will test Roh's commitment to democratization. On the one hand, his approach to political reforms will measure how far Roh is willing to go in distancing himself from Chun, who has clearly been identified with an authoritarian, undemocratic political system. On the other hand, by virtually all calculations, a more liberal election law would reduce the ruling party's seats in the Assembly, presenting Roh with some tough choices in dealing with his followers as well as with the chore of legislating in an Assembly with a large, aggressive opposition contingent. If the DJP's past position on changing the election law is any guide, Roh has a difficult road ahead:

- Last November, the ruling party proposed retaining the most objectionable elements of the old law--heavily weighting rural districts that usually support the government--and adding a new technical wrinkle that would maximize the DJP's representation in the cities, traditionally opposition strongholds.
- Last week a ruling party official publicly said a failure of interparty talks to produce a new law in time for elections in early February would bring the government to hold the contest under the existing rules. [redacted]

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Whither the Opposition?

Roh's ability to compromise on political reform also will depend on the opposition, which faces an even larger trial in the weeks ahead. Its two main leaders, Kim Young Sam and Kim Dae Jung, appear discredited as well as disorganized after their loss to Roh. Several widely respected South Korean political commentators, as well as public opinion generally, are blaming the two Kims' selfish presidential ambitions for their defeat. So far, the two men have devoted most of their energies to a public effort to discredit the election, but both face critical political and personal decisions about their strategies. [redacted]

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¹The National Assembly election law is stacked in the government's favor, with a proportional distribution of seats that virtually ensures the ruling party a majority even with less than 30 percent of the popular vote. Talks on a new law stalled last November, when the split between Kim Dae Jung and Kim Young Sam produced two "main" opposition parties with differing views on how to change the law. [redacted]

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The ruling party's ability to control the political agenda and the clock on legislative reform are the most immediate sources of pressure on the opposition. Roh's plan to establish a bipartisan advisory council, along with the ruling party initiative for early National Assembly elections, should drive the opposition to regroup, if only to hold its ground against the government. For his part, Kim Young Sam has given permission for his party's legislators to discuss election law reform, although without abandoning his own spoiler's claims against Roh's "fraudulent" election. A spokesman for Kim Dae Jung has said his party is also ready to negotiate on a new parliamentary election formula, although Kim himself has stated publicly that his party will conduct a non-violent struggle to nullify the election. [redacted]

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More important for the future of the two Kims--and perhaps for the opposition movement as a whole--are growing demands from younger politicians for a share of the leadership:

- A group of young opposition politicians who dropped out of the Kims' factions last fall is calling for the two to take responsibility for their defeat by leaving the political scene.
- The Kims have also been criticized by radical nationalist Paek Ki Hwan, who entered the presidential race briefly to press them to decide on a single candidate. Paek has hinted he may establish a new leftwing party, which would tap into Kim Dae Jung's longtime base of dissident support. [redacted]

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The opposition's effort to lay blame for its election defeat, the lingering animosities of the campaign, and the pretensions of younger politicians to power will complicate how the two Kims and their parties deal with Roh and political reform. At the same time, the fact that neither Kim is willing to cooperate with the other presents those in the ruling camp who seek compromise on a new election law with a real question about who in the opposition can strike and deliver on any deals. [redacted]

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Neither Kim appears ready to leave politics without a fight. Both will probably use their influence over party nominations for parliamentary seats to keep challengers on the defensive and foster competition within the rank and file. Kim Dae Jung's greater political savvy and tighter grip on his party makes it hard to write him out of the picture. We believe Kim Young Sam lacks the same degree of authority and respect, making him the more vulnerable of the two. [redacted]

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Pressures From the Left and Right: The Radicals and the Military

The public's seeming acceptance of Roh's election has dealt the radical movement a major setback. [redacted] many radicals expected a victory by Roh to trigger a widespread backlash and drive mainstream university students and workers into their camp. This has not happened. Nonetheless, there are down sides to Roh's success: frustrations over his election and anger against the two Kims could impel some radicals to consider extreme measures--possibly terrorist attacks on South Korean or US facilities. We suspect the election outcome also will convince the hard core that fundamental political change can only occur through violent revolution. The highly fragmented radical movement has displayed remarkable powers of regeneration, and, ironically, Roh's promised political amnesty could help revitalize its ranks. [redacted]

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For the military, Roh's election almost certainly represents a major step toward domestic stability and a safeguard for its place in the power structure. According to a variety of sources, many officers have viewed Chun's departure as the only way to restore the military's image, tarnished by its close association with his rise to power and role in the brutal suppression of riots in the provincial city of Kwangju in 1980. [redacted]

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[redacted] reporting suggests many senior officers support his political aims. Growing military recognition of the need for at least modest political reform was evident last June, when senior officers opposed Chun's decision to declare martial law and instead endorsed Roh's reform proposal. Roh's ties to retired senior officers, such as his brother-in-law Kim Bok Dong and Defense Minister Chong Ho Yong, also will help him retain military loyalty. Both have extensive power bases in active-duty ranks and were instrumental in lining up the Army's support in June, when Roh went out on a limb with his democratization initiative. [redacted] Roh will try to avoid frictions in dealing with the Army leadership by giving greater weight to professional rather than political promotion criteria should also allow him to win points with senior officers who have criticized Chun's approach. [redacted]

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Nonetheless, Roh's public commitments include promises that run some risks for his ties to the military. He has said that his administration would get retired officers out of big business, tolerate greater levels of political dissent, and renew dialogue with North Korea, all sensitive topics with the Army. For these reasons, we do not believe Roh's course will be trouble free and expect skeptical senior officers to continue to monitor how he implements his platform. [redacted]

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Roh's Future: Some Room and Some Restraints

Several factors suggest Roh is well equipped to deal with the challenges before him:

- The size of his plurality victory has undercut the opposition's claims that he stole the election, giving him a honeymoon with a public that appears willing to take a wait-and-see attitude toward a new Roh administration.
- Roh's postelection political style, characterized by an astute use of themes focused on compromise and reconciliation, also augurs well for the next few months, when the president-elect will be able to set the tone, and perhaps even the agenda, for the political season.
- And Roh's reputation as a leader and a listener, rather than a Chun-like autocrat, suggests he will be able to draw new supporters into his network, instead of alienating those who have yet to join his political bandwagon inside the military and the ruling camp. [redacted] (b)(3)

If Roh is adroit, there is some chance his honeymoon could be extended simply because of the contrast he will present to Chun in the public's eye. At this point, we do not expect Chun to cause trouble for Roh, given the President's potential personal as well as political vulnerabilities. Other factors could work to Roh's advantage as well: the Olympics, continued tensions in North-South relations that put an even greater premium on strong leadership, and sustained economic growth all could add credits in Roh's column. [redacted] (b)(3)

Even so, Roh's campaign commitments to reform and democratization have yet to be tested. In the weeks ahead, he will face a new, more assertive legislature, an outspoken press, and an active radical element, all representing challenges that will not abate. These pressures will severely test his willingness to tolerate a level of dissent and political competition that important elements in South Korea's society have come to expect. [redacted] (b)(3)

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SOUTH KOREA'S PRESIDENTIAL TRANSITION: THE TESTS FOR ROH TAE WOO [redacted]

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