

South Korea: The Presidential Election of 2002

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On December 19, 2002, the Republic of Korea (South Korea) elected a new president. After a very close race the winner was Roh Moo-hyun, a former human rights lawyer from the ruling Millennium Democratic Party (MDP). Roh defeated Lee Hoi-chang, the candidate of the opposition Grand National Party (GNP) by half a million votes (see [Table 1](#)). Voter turnout stood at 70.8%, a drop from 92.5% in the previous elections. The election has been described as a conflict of generations, and also as a conflict between left and right. In the end, the more liberal-minded Roh won with the support of the younger generation. For Roh, the road to victory was a challenging journey.

Roh Moo-hyun (56) was born in Kimhae, in southeast Korea. Coming from a poor farming family he did not attend college but taught himself law at night to pass the bar exam. During the 1980s he gained a reputation as a liberal lawyer, working on human rights cases. In 1987, he spent time in prison as a result of his activities. In the 2002-election campaign, Roh's main concerns were clean politics, the eradication of corruption and an end to regional rivalries. He also pledged to reduce the gap between rich and poor and increase social welfare. Roh expressed an independent view regarding Korea's relationship

with the US and favoured a 'more equal' relationship between the two countries. These promises attracted the support of younger voters who were fed up with the old-style 'money politics' that benefited mostly politicians and business and also dissatisfied with the American military presence in the country. The preparations for the presidential elections began in spring 2002 with the nomination race within the MDP. In an effort to make the process more open and democratic, the party introduced a system comparable to US-primaries. Roh, without support from any faction in the MDP, emerged as the surprise winner in April 2002.

Following Roh's nomination, the MDP experienced an overwhelming defeat in both local elections and in parliamentary by-elections. Many party members blamed Roh for the bad results and demanded another nomination race. Roh resisted pressure to step down but his popularity ratings continuously declined during the summer. This drop reflected the disappointment among Koreans with the ruling government. After initial successes Kim Dae-jung's reform drive lost momentum, and many tasks to change the economic and political system remain yet to be completed. Kim Dae-jung had also pledged clean politics at the beginning of his presidency but during the summer of 2002, two of his sons were implicated in corruption scandals showing that the problem persisted. Koreans grew impatient with the slow progress of change and in turn with the ruling party.

Roh's main challenger was Lee Hoi-chang (67). This was Lee's second attempt to win the presidential elections, after narrowly losing to Kim Dae-jung in 1997. Lee had entered politics relatively late after a career in the country's judicial service. He had a reputation of honesty

and integrity with conservative values while others called him dry and boring. Lee tried to overcome his dull image by wearing more casual clothes and dyeing his hair brown. His family hailed from North Korea, so he was not connected to either of the two rival regions of South Korea, Honam in the southwest and Youngnam in the southeast. Lee pledged clean politics and support for market economy. His pro-business stance also included the promise of crackdowns of illegal strikes. His campaign was not without scandals, mostly concerning his two sons who were accused of avoiding military service by losing weight before the necessary examination. Lee criticized Kim Dae-jung's engagement policy with North Korea harshly and promised a more hard-line course with the northern regime, closer to the policy of US-President Bush. He was also seen as pro-American, an issue that evolved during the election campaign. Lee was supported by the United Liberal Democrats (ULD), another conservative party with a base in the central Chungchong-region.

A third strong contender emerged in September 2002. Polls found that an independent member of the National Assembly, Chung Moon-joon, achieved high popularity ratings. Chung (51) was the manager of Hyundai Heavy Industries, a son of the founder of one of the largest chaebol (large conglomerates) in Korea. He was also a FIFA-vice president and organised the Football World Cup in Korea earlier that year. The success of the organisation and the Korean team brought him a wave of support. Chung announced his bid in September and founded a new party, National Alliance 21, to support him in November 2002. Some MDP-members joined the new party. Chung's programme remained vague, promising clean politics and national reunification. During the autumn, Chung's popularity began to wane,

while Roh gained. Chung's entry into the presidential race split the vote of more liberal voters, while Lee had the full support of conservative voters. This constellation resembled the pattern of previous elections, where the victor had benefited from a split opposition.⁽¹⁾ Realising that only a joint bid would give them any chance to beat Lee, Roh and Chung agreed on a coalition in November 2002. In two independently conducted telephone polls Roh proved to be more popular and was chosen as presidential candidate, to be supported by Chung.

Beside the two main candidates were several other minor candidates. The most prominent was Kwon Young Ghil, who made a second attempt after his run in 1997. Kwon stood as a candidate of the Democratic Labour Party (DLP) and was well-known as the leader of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a radical alliance of trade unions. In 2002, Kwon won 3.9% of the vote, an increase from 1.2% in the previous election. Former home-minister Lee Han-dong represented the small Hanaro National Union. Kim Young-Kyu stood for the radical Socialist Party of Korea. Lastly, the Buddhist monk Kim Kil-su campaigned for the Hoguk Dang (Party for the Defence of the Fatherland). Two issues dominated the election campaign: the relationship with North Korea and the relationship with the United States. Roh favoured Kim Dae-jung's sunshine policy of engagement with North Korea and promised to continue this strategy. Lee in contrast had been an outspoken critic and vowed to be less generous with the Kim Jong-il regime. He pledged to stop all financial aid until the North becomes more cooperative in the dismantling of its nuclear facilities.

During late 2002, the issue of American military presence on the peninsula became an

important political issue. In Summer 2002, two teenage girls were killed by an American armoured vehicle. South Koreans demanded a trial for the two soldiers involved and when in due course an American court martial acquitted them, demonstrations against this 'unfair judgement' sprang up all over the country. The demonstrators' main demands were a retrial in a Korean court and a personal and sincere apology by President George W. Bush. The main presidential candidates also joined the calls for revisions to the legal code governing the status of the 37,000 American forces stationed on the peninsula.

The previous elections had been dominated by regionalism and this election was no exception. Korean parties were still divided along regional lines, rather than by programme or ideology. The MDP's basis was in Honam, but by choosing a candidate from Youngnam the party hoped that the party would be more acceptable to voters in that area. This plan did not succeed; voting along regional lines remained prevalent. Roh claimed over 90% of the votes in Kwangju and the surrounding Cholla-Provinces, while Lee was supported by over two thirds of the Youngnam-voters. Previous presidents had favoured their own region in appointments for administrative and governmental posts. As the first president hailing from Honam, Kim Dae-jung had tried to redress the imbalance in government and administration, leading to cries of 'discrimination' from Youngnam. It was feared that a GNP-victory would have led to a purge, upsetting the continuity of the administration. Roh's promise of overcoming these rivalries should prevent this and help to root out this problem in the long run.

The incumbent president Kim Dae-jung was constitutionally barred from running again. He will remain in office until Roh's official

inauguration in February 2003. Lee Hoi-chang declared his retirement from politics, leaving the door open for a change in leadership of the opposition party. The tasks for the new president are challenging: the reform of the economy needs to be furthered to ensure the future growth of Korea's economy. Both labour and business have to accept the need for further changes. The political system needs to be reformed to reduce corruption and regionalism and deepen democracy. This will be made more difficult by an opposition majority in the National Assembly. In foreign policy, Roh needs to balance an engagement policy with North Korea with the demands of the more hawkish American administration. North Korea's belligerent attitude and the outspoken Anti-Americanism in South Korea make this task difficult for Roh. With the departure of Kim Dae-jung, a new area in Korean politics will begin in 2003. In the last decade politics had been dominated by the 'three Kims', Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam and Kim Jong-pil, who had spent most of their political life under authoritarian regimes and often acted in the same manor as their authoritarian predecessors. The new and much younger leadership gives Korea a chance for a real change. Many of the younger voters were certainly hoping for this when they voted for Roh Moo-hyun.

Election results:

Roh Moo-hyun (MDP) 48.9%

Lee Hoi-chang (GNP) 46.6%

Kwon Young-Ghil (DLP) 3.9%

Lee Han-dong (Hanaro National Union) 0.3%

Kim Kil-su 0.2%

Kim Young-Kyu 0.1%

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Footnotes

(1) In 1987, Roh Tae-woo was elected by less than 37% of the votes, while Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam gained 27 and 28% respectively. In 1997, the conservative vote was divided between Lee Hoi-chang and Rhee In-je, leaving the victory to Kim Dae-jung)

Table 1: Election result Korea 2002

Region	Lee Hoi-chang 이회창	Roh Moo-hyun 노무현	Lee Han-dong 이한동	Kwon Young-Ghil 권영길	Kim Young-kyu 김영규	Kim Kil-su 김길수
Total 합계	11,443,297 (46.59)	12,014,277 (48.91)	74,027 (0.30)	957,148 (3.90)	22,063 (0.09)	51,104 (0.21)
Seoul 서울	2,447,376 (44.96)	2,792,957 (51.30)	12,724 (0.23)	179,79 (3.30)	4,706 (0.09)	6,437 (0.12)
Pusan 부산	1,314,274 (66.75)	587,946 (29.86)	2,148 (0.11)	61,281 (3.11)	1,38 (0.07)	2,064 (0.10)
Taegu 대구	1,002,164 (77.75)	240,745 (18.68)	1,699 (0.13)	42,174 (3.27)	810 (0.06)	1,317 (0.10)
In'chon 인천	547,205 (44.57)	611,766 (49.83)	3,6 (0.29)	61,655 (5.02)	1,612 (0.13)	1,978 (0.16)
Kwangju 광주	26,869 (3.58)	715,182 (95.18)	803 (0.11)	7,243 (0.96)	305 (0.04)	1,014 (0.13)
Taejon 대전	266,76 (39.82)	369,046 (55.09)	2,157 (0.32)	29,728 (4.44)	747 (0.11)	1,408 (0.21)
Ulsan 울산	267,737 (52.88)	178,584 (35.27)	997 (0.20)	57,786 (11.41)	502 (0.10)	716 (0.14)
Kyonggi-do 경기	2,120,191 (44.19)	2,430,193 (50.65)	26,072 (0.54)	209,346 (4.36)	4,119 (0.09)	8,085 (0.17)
Kangwon-do 강원	400,405 (52.48)	316,722 (41.51)	3,406 (0.45)	38,722 (5.08)	969 (0.13)	2,713 (0.36)
Chungchong-bukdo 충북	311,044 (42.89)	365,623 (50.42)	3,205 (0.44)	41,731 (5.75)	949 (0.13)	2,61 (0.36)
Chungchong-namdo 충남	375,11 (41.23)	474,531 (52.16)	4,973 (0.55)	49,579 (5.45)	1,303 (0.14)	4,322 (0.48)
Cholla-bukdo 전북	65,334 (6.19)	966,053 (91.59)	2,505 (0.24)	14,904 (1.41)	817 (0.08)	5,187 (0.49)
Cholla-namdo 전남	53,074 (4.63)	1,070,506 (93.39)	2,83 (0.25)	12,215 (1.07)	988 (0.09)	6,707 (0.59)
Kyongsang-bukdo 경북	1,056,446 (73.47)	311,358 (21.65)	3,332 (0.23)	62,522 (4.35)	1,344 (0.09)	2,936 (0.20)
Kyongsang-namdo 경남	1,083,564 (67.52)	434,642 (27.08)	2,832 (0.18)	79,853 (4.98)	1,224 (0.08)	2,629 (0.16)
Cheju-do 제주	105,744 (39.93)	148,423 (56.05)	744 (0.28)	8,619 (3.25)	288 (0.11)	981 (0.37)