INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Round One: Korea's Opposition Wins on Points

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Dear Peter,

Something very important happened in Korea on February 12th. The Korean people went to the polls in record numbers and voted decisively for democracy.

They may not get it. But the vote has set in motion a process of change in which the opposition has begun to rally its forces against the government. The vote spells a complete defeat for the government's political program, which it has pursued doggedly since the military coup that propelled President Chun Doo-hwan to power in 1980. And it leaves Korea's near-term future in great uncertainty. The opposition is learning how to flex its muscles again. But it is faced with a smarter, if severely chastened, government that is determined to hang on to power.

The outcome of the vote is as remarkable as the fact that the Korean people were ever given a choice. After my earlier report on the political party system in Korea, I concluded that the elections this year would be a bore. The National Assembly did not hold much power. The opposition had no chance of winning control of it. And real political conflict would have to find an outlet somewhere outside of the Assembly.

But a combination of mistakes on the part of the government, a bold offensive by the opposition, and the surprising strong voice of the Korean people--no one really knew before just where they stood--has changed everything.

In the first four years of the Presidency of Chun Doo-hwan, Korea did not have much of a political opposition. The government banned 567 politicians from all political activity. Kim Dae-jung, the best-known leader, was in jail and later went into political exile in the United States. Kim Young-sam was under house arrest until June 1983, and then was barred from attending political meetings or appearing in the press or on the television. The opposition was leaderless and rudderless. It was not just the absence of the generals, but the whole infrastructure of lieutenants, captains, and majors that left the opposition so aimless.

At the founding of the Fifth Republic, President Chun literally called in two politicians, Yoo Chi-song and Kim Chong-chol, gave them money and told them to go out and found opposition parties. The government wanted to create a

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multi-party system that diffused political conflict. It wanted an opposition that would cooperate with the government to reach policy goals, rather than work to obstruct the government and find ways to put it out of power. Or, as one diplomat put it, "The government wants malleable politicians who conduct politics according to the government's script. It wants a rubber-stamp assembly without appearing to be one."

The government did have some reasonable justification. The sharp confrontation between the government and the opposition in the 1970s paralyzed the National Assembly. Assembly proceedings were frequently disrupted by strikes, boycotts, sit-ins, and fistfights. The government wanted to structure the Assembly so it could proceed with business as usual.

And it succeeded rather admirably, something that government officials pointed to with great pride. They called it political development. Rather than going for the jugular at each sign of taking offense, politicians put on a show of dialogue, debate, and compromise. The government party, the Democratic Justice Party (DJP), ostentatiously "gave in" to opposition demands on key legislation after lengthy negotiations, even though in a technical sense it did not have to. The government controlled a majority of votes in the Assembly.

The felicity with which it controlled the Assembly and the opposition puffed up the government's self-confidence that the politics of confrontation were a thing of the past. That, at least, is what it repeatedly said--both publically and privately.

The 567 politicians who were barred from political activities were legally on a blacklist until 1988. But, again with ostentatious magnanimity, in waves, the government gradually restored political rights to politicians who it said had repented and turned away from their divisive ways of the past. In reality it started with the small fry first.

But the gradual release of politicians kept the opposition in continuous flux. The government's greatest fear was that the released politicians would form a new political party that would be able to raise an effective challenge to existing structure of power. But as each wave recovered its rights, some politicians dropped out of politics, having gone into business or teaching. Others joined the existing opposition parties, many telling themselves that if the parties had no genuine opposition character, they were at least able to make their voice felt. That was the best way to accommodate the reality of military control over politics.

The strategy worked. The opposition was divided, unable to organize independently, unable to escape from the manipulating arm of the government. The government was confident it could control the situation--a confidence that must have been egged on by the accolades from foreign diplomats and visiting dignitaries who praised each step toward apparent liberalization. And the President and most government leaders apparently believed the Korean people were basically on their side, at least grudgingly accepting if not wholly embracing the government's idea of democratic development.

But in the fall of 1984 the chemistry began to change. And the government seemed not to notice it.

Last fall was especially violent on the university campuses. Campus unrest in Korea is a chronic problem that the government scarcely even hopes to solve. It merely tries to limit the damage. In the spring of 1984, again to the accolades of the international community, the government decided to withdraw police from the campuses. The students would have free speech and assembly inside the university gates. Previously police moved on in force at the first sign of a rally, swinging batons and firing tear gas. Police maintained an extensive intelligence network of plainclothesmen on the campuses, often indistinguishable from the students.

The government hoped that withdrawl of the police from campuses would remove a major irritant and encourage the students to stick to the books. It did not. The students demonstrated more frequently and more violently. It is hard to say how much broad support the demonstrators received among their own classmates, much less from the population at large. But their violence was eye catching, and contagious. The students turned over police cars and knocked down fences. Students at Seoul National University (SNU) forcibly detained for several days a few men who they accused of being police spies. They attacked camera crews from the state-run Korea Broadcasting System, which they accused of giving biased coverage to their demonstrations (quite rightfully). A group of students occupied the headquarters of the ruling party and had to be forcibly evicted.

In October, the students at SNU launched a mass boycott of mid-term examinations, with over 80% of the students joining in. They demanded the right to form an independent, freely-elected student union. Campus authorities said that demonstrating students were intimidating their fellow classmates and that students who wanted to take their examinations did not have the free choice of doing so. The President of SNU then invited the police on campus to restore order. Several thousand police came for a few days and then left, without much incident, and without much effect, since the students still did not take their examinations.

But the biggest fallout from the incident took place in the National Assembly. The rank and file of the Democratic Korea Party (DKP), then the largest opposition party, wanted to launch a broadside against the government for reversing its much-heralded campus autonomy policy. They wanted to make a genuine stink in order to preserve just a semblance of their own credibility. What, after all, is an opposition party that cannot attack the government for a crackdown on campus freedom, in violation of its own well-publicized policy yet?

But the party leadership would not hear of it, and forced party members to mute their criticism of the government severely. As one party member told me, "Our party is meek toward the outside, but very strict internally."

The incident caused the sprouts of dissatisfaction within the party to push through the surface. But the government was still asleep. It proceeded in full confidence with its program of liberalization.

The government was widely expected to release some or all of the remaining blacklisted politicians before the upcoming National Assembly elections. This would be another move toward "national reconciliation." Of course by waiting til the end, many reasoned, the freed politicians would not have the time to overcome their internal squabbling and present a credible fighting force to compete in the election. With the election outcome assured, including the ascendancy of the manipulated opposition, it mattered little that the freed politicians would speak more loudly against the government. They would not have the organized institutional platform on which to launch their demands. They would be irrelavent to the main structure of power. The Korean people would forget them. That, at least, seems to have been the government's thinking.

On November 30, the government lifted the ban on 84 political leaders, leaving only the last 14 really big fish still covered by the ban--including the three Kims, Kim Dae-jung, Kim Young-sam, and Kim Jong-pil, who were the strongest contenders for the presidency before the military coup. But in the end, the last 14 did not matter. The government inadvertently let the cat out of the bag.

In late December, ten Assemblymen from the DKP suddenly announced that they would leave their party and founded a new opposition party together with a group of politicians who had just been freed.

Finally the government seemed to realize what was happening, and it moved in with its dirtiest bag of tricks in a last ditch effort to reverse the tide. On the day of the announced defections, the National Security Police detained without arrest two of the defecting politicians. They were presented with evidence of crimes committed--one for having an affair with a girl who operated an elevator in the National Assembly building (adultery is illegal in Korea), and another for taking money from DKP members to help assure their nomination for district assembly seats. The two men were badgered into signing confessions and they pledged not to run in the election (pledges they later violated).

The National Security Police maintains an extensive intelligence operation on public figures, mainly to give them ammunition when they need it in situations like this. As Nam Jae-hee, a ruling-party assemblyman, told me, "For politicians who have weaknesses, doing a brave thing is very risky."

The police action stemmed the flow of dissatisfied DKP members for the time being. But it was too late to halt the snowballing strength of the movement to found a new party.

Still the government did not give up. Leaders of the new party--to be called the New Korea Democratic Party (NKDP)--say local police chiefs and petty bureaucrats systematically interferred with their efforts to set up local chapters, mainly by preventing them from disseminating literature. In Seoul, the Party looked for weeks to find a landlord willing to rent them an office space. And when the landlord of their current office found out it was to be for a party headquarters, he turned off the elevators, forcing party members to carry furniture up ten flights of stairs. Potential donors were scared off by the threat of tax investigations, and the Party's coffers remained bare. The Party was forced to raise money by virtually auctioning off nominations for its appointed national constituency seats awarded on a proportional basis. This, of course, the government jumped on loudly as evidence of corruption. (In truth, the opposition leaders are far from unblemished.)

The government denied that it was behind any systematic attempt to subvert the new party. And in fact, the fracas over how the party came into existence was quickly overshadowed by the striking outburst of free speech that exploded when the official campaign got under way.

I first met Lee Min-woo, President of the NKDP on January 22, four days after the party was officially inaugurated. Lee was and is the compromise leader acceptable to the main factions within the NKDP--namely the factions of Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-Sam. Although Lee has traditionally been closer to Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung has evidently decided he can live with him on the top.

At 69, Lee today is the oldest representative in the National Assembly. And he looks his age. He is not frail, but age and his considerable experience in the political opposition has left him with a crusty exterior as if to say, "I am an old man now and it matters not what you do to me." When answering a question he will purse his lips slowly, raise his broad face upward, thrust his lips forward as if about to smack them and, if the occasion warrants, launch into his opponents with bittersweet sarcasm. Lee is a veteran opposition politician, having been elected to the National Assembly five times before coming under the ban.

After having made the round talking with ruling party representatives, government officials, and opposition assemblymen from the DKP, I found Lee striking, almost startlingly, frank. I met with him after he gave a news conference with the Korean press where, for the first time, I heard a public figure say for public attribution in Korea that the President was a military dictator who lacked legitimacy. He pointedly traced the President's rise to power to the bloody Kwangju uprising in 1980, and demanded an investigation of the event. It is precisely these subjects--the legitimacy of the government and the President and the bloodshed in Kwangju that have been taboo for four years.

The Korean press, at that time, did not report Lee's remarks in full. But it was not long before the Korean people did discover that there was a new political party in the running that was not afraid to speak its mind.

The official campaign got underway on January 23rd, and when the joint campaign rallies started up, the Korean people were treated to a frankness of political dialogue that was unimaginable just a few weeks earlier. Campaign laws place severe restrictions on how candidates can communicate with the voters. They are allowed to address their constituents only at officially sponsored rallies, in which all candidates from a single electoral district are given equal time. There are also severe rules about slandering opponents and the President. The candidates are allowed to distribute only a certain number of handbills, of prescribed limted content, and can paste up only a fixed number of posters.

As it turned out, nearly all candidates broke the rules. My own mailbox was stuffed many times with illegal brochures. The NKDP, however, was especially provocative. By coincidence, Lee Min-woo ran in the district where I live, which politically is highly prestigious. In this election, it was an important sympolic race between three very strong candidates--Lee Min-woo, Lee Chong-chan (moderate and highly respected floor leader for the ruling party), and Chyung

Dae-chul (current DKP representative from a prominent opposition family who eventually lost the race). Lee Min-woo's illegal pamphlets in my mailbox repeated the rhetoric I heard at his first news conference, and included photographs showing him with Kim Dae-jung and Kim Young-sam. Another photo showed Lee at the site of a graveyard in Kwangju where victims of the uprising are buried. The photos were a good graphic display of what Lee does so well: thumb his nose at the government.

The Central Election Committee tried feebly to put some lids on the scope of the debate. At one point, a fracas followed a ruling that the phrase "restoration of democracy" was illegal campaign rehtoric and was banned from handbills. The government believed the phrase was an attack on the constitution. But by that time, the restriction was a joke. Up on the podium, all across the nation, NKDP candidates were telling excited audiences that Korea was ruled by a military dictator who came to power illegally through violence. They wanted to go to the National Assembly to push through constitutional change to establish true democracy. The excitement was contagious. Even candidates from the more moderate DKP began to tell their constituents that they too supported Kim Dae-jung and his struggle for democracy. Kim Dae-jung proved to be a powerful symbol on the campaign trail, despite all efforts of the government to convince people that Kim was an antiquated relic from the 1970s, passe, and no longer relevant.

Candidates sarcastically ridiculed the President, and especially his wife. The President's wife is extremely unpopular in Korea and has become a serious political liability to him. People strongly dislike her personal manner, which they consider too pushy and ambitious. (By contrast, the wife of late President Park Chung-hee, until her death in 1974, was popular and was considered a softening influence on the President's harsh ways.) There is great popular resentment of the political and economic rise of the first lady's relatives, some of whom were directly involved in the huge financial scandals that rocked the early years of the Chun presidency.

None of the attitudes toward the President or the jokes about his wife were new--but people were talking about them openly, publically, in the most provocative ways. And they were getting away with it. "A taboo has been broken," is how one political scientist put it.

It still isn't clear why the government let all of this happen. Kim Dae-jung told me he thought the government just couldn't do anything to stop it. Too many people were speaking out and too many of the Korean people liked what they were hearing. The government was powerless.

Diplomats believe the government at least thought it could not afford the bad international press, or the critical diplomatic cables, that would have poured out had speech been too harshly supressed. That would have required the arrest of many candidates. One diplomat told me during the campaign, "The election is really more important internationally than domestically." The diplomat meant that since no power would change hands as a result of the election, it was really just a public relations event to gain the government international credibility, which it needs badly for the 1986 Asian Games and the 1988 Olympics.

The government also remained confident until the end that the new outspoken party would not do very well at the polls. Why not let them have their day on the podium, and then after the election things can go back to normal? After all, only the ruling party controlled the vast resources of the government, which it could use so effectively to muster the vote, especially in the countryside. And look at the qualifications of the ruling party candidates--scientists, Ph.D.s, experienced government administrators, retired generals. Compared to that, the opposition was fielding a tired, ragtag slate of has-been professional politicians and radical student demonstrators, some not even graduated from school yet. Surely the Korean people would not be fooled by the opposition's "out-of-date, out-of-touch" rhetoric. That is what then Minister of Culture and Information Lee Jin-hie called it. In short the government became overconfident.

There was plenty of illegal campaigning, and it was not limited to the illegal excesses of free speech. Two days before the election, workers from various parties were passing out envelopes filled with crisp new ten-thousand won notes (worth about $12) in the garment district of the East Gate Market in Seoul. Money reportedly poured into Kwangju to assure the ruling party a victory there. A victory in Kwangju, Kim Dae-jung's home country, would be symbolically very important for the government. (And they did win there--one seat from each of the two urban districts, while Kim Dae-jung supporters won the other two seats of the districts.) But there is no evidence that the campaign irregularities were part of an orchestrated government effort to manipulate the voting.

The campaign was **unmistakably** charged and electric. On February 6th, two days before Kim Dae-jung returned from exile in the United States, a crowd of close to 100,000 people turned out in the Chungno district to hear Lee Min-woo face off against his opponents. There was clearly an organized cheering section for Lee, but the ripple of response and the excitement at hearing a man speak out his mind could not have been orchestrated. The rally, like 99% of everything else that happened in the campaign, was peaceful, despite the excitement over the open clash of opinion.

The rallies finished four days before the election--the traditional time for the government to move in with cash to cool down the emotions of the people. But the bizarre return of Kim Dae-jung, while not fully reported locally in all its gory details, at least kept the opposition in the minds of the people. It is hard to say if Kim Dae-jung or Kim Young-sam exerted any significant influence on the outcome of the election. Mainly, they gave the opposition an easily grasped symbol that candidates used on the stump to appeal to voters. But the work of the campaign and the sheer courage of men like Lee Min-woo is what made the election.

Election day was cool, overcast, and ordinary. Some of the delegation of human-rights activists and congressmen who accompanied Kim Dae-jung in town. A diplomat ferried one of the congressmen around to look at the voting and the congressman quickly became bored and asked to go back to his hotel. The polling places looked more or less like any place where I had ever voted in the United States--tables of officials checking identities, issuing ballots, neutral and partisan observers, curtained booths and a locked box for the ballots. Middle-class men and women filed into the polls in the district where I live, chatting, joking with the officials. And then they left. The police were

stationed in buses in alleys, hidden away from the polls. But there they stayed. I am unaware of any single act of violence on that day.

By the middle of the afternoon, it was clear that something very important was happening. Turnout was much higher than in the last election. When the polls closed, over 84% of the eligible voters had cast ballots, compared with 78% in the previous election.

And by the early hours of the morning the following day everyone knew the government had received a stunning rebuke and that the new radical opposition party had won the hearts of the Korean people.

The government party officially maintains to this day that it is satisfied with the results. It received about the same percentage of the popular vote as last time and retained its majority of seats in the National Assembly handily. It even points with pride to the large representation in the National Assembly of the opposition, arguing that this just shows the voting was fair and that Korea has something far closer to democracy than any other Asian country except Japan.

But privately party members and government officials admit that the vote was a setback, a defeat for the government, and a popular rejection of the government's political program. In fact, even though the Korean people did not--really could not--vote out the government, they did vote down the government's main political goals. They voted into the Assembly precisely the politicians the government had worked so hard to destroy over the previous years.

The government won 35% of the popular vote which, because of the weighted voting system, gave the ruling DJP 147 seats in the 276-seat assembly. But the Party was trounced in the cities. In Seoul it canvased only 27% of the vote and it lost seats in two electoral districts, including one in which a cabinet minister was running.

The NKDP, by contrast, won 42% of the vote in Seoul and swept all the districts in Korea's major cities--Seoul, Pusan, and Inchon. The party won 29% of the popular vote, and collectively the opposition parties won over 50% of the vote.

The NKDP made up for some setbacks in the city by turning out a large rural vote. Many observers have considered this somewhat ironic, since government policy has not particularly favored the farmers. But the relative stability of rural life, and the ability of the government to control more carefully the flow of money for public works give the ruling party greater ability to operate a vote-getting machine. The ruling party used that machine to deliver its message to the people--something the NKDP had no hope of matching, certainly not in the three weeks between its formal inauguration and the election.

What the new opposition party exploited so well were the large public rallies organized by the government, where it could make the best use of its main resource--a loud fiery voice. The new party also had help in the cities from vacationing college students who worked for it.

Percentage of votes won by major parties (percent)

	DJP	NKDP	DKP	KNP
Seoul	27.3	43.3	19.8	2.3
Pusan	27.9	36.9	23.6	10.4
Taegu	28.3	29.7	18.5	15.6
Inchon	37.1	37.4	22.0	3.4
Kyonggi-do	34.6	27.8	20.4	13.7
Kangwon-do	46.2	11.3	17.8	17.6
Chungchong-buk-do	56.7	18.3	15.8	8.5
Chungchong-nam-do	39.5	21.7	20.8	10.7
Chollabuk-do	36.8	26.4	18.8	11.8
Chollanam-do	35.7	25.4	18.0	10.2
Kyongsang-buk-do	44.7	15.7	16.9	10.7
Kyongsang-nam-do	40.3	23.4	19.4	11.2
Cheju-do	31.8	5.9	17.1	
Overall pct.	35.3	29.2	19.5	9.2

Final election returns

	Total	DJP	NKDP	DKP	KNP	Others	Independents
Seoul	28	13	14	1			
Pusan	12	3	6	2	1		
Taegu	6	2	2	1	1		
Inchon	4	2	2				
Kyonggi-do	20	10	4	3	3		
Kangwon-do	12	6		1	4		1
Chungchongbuk-do	8	4	2	1	1		
Chungchongnam-do	16	8	4	4			
Chollabuk-do	14	7	2	1	3	1	
Chollanam-do	22	11	5	5		1	
Kyongsangbuk-do	20	10	4	3	1		2
Kyongsangnam-do	20	10	5	4	1		
Cheju-do	2	1					1
Subtotal	184	87	50	26	15	2	4
Proportional representation	92	61	17	9	5		
Total	276	148	67	35	20	2	4

Source: Korea Herald

There was another new trend in the election--vote casting according to party preference. Previous wisdom held that only popular, well-known candidates had hope of winning a seat. But some young firebrands from the new party, virtually unkown before the election, were swept into office, defeating well-known, experienced opponents. One such candidate was Lee Chul--a 37-year old senior at Seoul National University. Lee was arrested over a decade ago as a student at SNU and sentenced to death for conspiring to overthrow the government. The evidence: empty pop bottles at a meeting place, which the prosecutor said could be nothing other than canisters for molotov cocktails. The government obviously never carried out the sentence, and after getting out of jail Lee was able to resume his studies.

The government seemed rather to enjoy letting the press play up Lee's "radical" background, but it apparently did not work. In reality Lee is mild in manner and polite, and thinks the campaign to play up his background as a student activist has distorted the true picture of himself and hurt him politically. Lee was finally forced to resign from the University a day before his graduation due to a rule that prohibits all students from engaging in politics. He saved the University the trouble of expelling him.

Given the government's vast resources, its organizational continuity, and its superior access to the mass media--especially the government television network--the fact that the ruling party only matched its 35% performance in the last election is not very impressive.

But even more than a rejection of the government party per se, the vote was a rejection of the government-sponsored opposition. The DKP, which controlled the largest opposition block of 82 seats in the last assembly, dropped to 35 seats, while the NKDP came from nowhere to gain 67 seats. (It has since picked

up independent seats, and at time of typing has picked up a mass defection from the DKP to give it 102 seats, but that is subject of a later report.) The Korea National Party (NKP), which won 25 seats in the previous election, dropped to 20 seats and further defections from the party will likely put it below the minimum needed for a parliamentary negotiating group, leaving it out of discussions on the running of the Assembly.

What the voters rejected was the government's idea that the opposition should play only by the government's rules. It voted into the assembly a party whose only purpose is to revise the constitution, change the electoral system, get the military out of politics and, if it has the might, to put President Chun out of office as soon as it can. The opposition in the last Assembly was a policy opposition. It did debate vigorously over policy measures, but it played within the bounds of not questioning the premises of the system and not directly challenging the President. The new opposition intends precisely to enter these forbidden zones and put off consideration of all other policy questions. Their determination is bolstered by a firm belief that the Korean people broadly support them and they are not in a mood to compromise.

The issue is very simple: the opposition wants an electoral system--particularly for the President--that will allow them to translate their widespread popular support into a share of power, and they see constitutional revision as the principal means to accomplish that. The opposition firmly believes that the current system of indirect voting for the presidency will allow the military to engineer the election of another former general in 1988. It would also like to scrap the current electoral law for the National Assembly which has allowed the government party to win a majority of seats with far less than a majority of the popular vote.

The government appears intent on stonewalling. It says that political stability requires that the constitution go unchanged for at least the first presidential term. It says that peaceful transfer of power is more important than opening wide the floodgates of democracy; Korea has never had a peaceful transfer of the presidency. Privately, government officials and ruling-party members argue, with apparent candor, that the Korean people are not yet ready for full democracy because factionalism is intense and politicians too corrupt. The government appears intent on holding on to power and, right or wrong, ignoring the clear message of the election that the Korean people want democracy.

The election has, in the broadest sense, caused the political system to come full circle. Despite the government's efforts to foster a multi-party system that diffused political conflict, the nation once again has a two-party system with the lines drawn more clearly than at any time in the past 25 years. The government failed to create a new center of political gravity with its manipulated opposition and now, as one diplomat put it, "All the elements are in place for a confrontation."

The government clearly has been chastened by the experience. People who know President Chun say the election results were a great personal shock. He seems finally to have realized that he failed to sell his ideas on gradual political development to the Korean people and, worse, has failed utterly to convince the Korean people of his own legitimacy. He moved in a new leadership team to revamp the government's public image, and now speaks of the need for dialogue with the opposition.

What is not clear is whether President Chun has the ability to move beyond dialogue to compromise.

The opposition too has yet to prove it can overcome its internal bickering, which is intense, or that it has gained the maturity and learned the political skills of challenging the government without frightening it and bringing the house down. Many Koreans are now openly fearful that the old historical sequence of liberalization, chaos, and military intervention has begun once again.

I don't want to make predictions, Peter. But I promise not to leave my seat here at ringside and I'll send you a full blow-by-blow when the next round is out.

Best,

Steven B. Butler

Steven B. Butler

Received in Hanover 5/6/85