

# It's Our Party (and We'll Cheer If We Want To)

John Feffer | April 30, 2004

Imagine if nearly three-quarters of the U.S. Congress were thrown out on its collective ear and replaced by a new generation of 30 and 40-somethings, many of them considerably more progressive than John Kerry. Imagine if the number of women in Congress doubled. Imagine a new labor party securing ten seats and a pivotal minority position.

A fantasy? Not for South Koreans.

When voters went to the polls in South Korea on April 15, they performed just this electoral miracle. Impeached president Roh Moo Hyun and his Uri ("Our") Party were the chief beneficiaries of the results. The Uri Party, which tripled its share, now commands a majority in parliament, with the renascent Democratic Labor party to its left.

Some U.S. pundits have bent over backward to assure the public that the electoral results were far from revolutionary. As Georgetown Professor Victor Cha wrote in *Far East Economic Review*, "the Uri Party's bark may be worse than its bite" for it won't fundamentally challenge military relations with the United States, bail out North Korea with unsound economic projects, or tinker with the Constitution. But as the Bush administration continues to fumble its North Korea policy and China stakes out a larger foreign policy claim in East Asia, the Uri Party may well herald a fundamental transformation of politics on the Korean peninsula and beyond.

A month ago, it was revenge and not revolution that was brewing. In March, the two major parties in the South Korean parliament—the conservative Grand National Party (GNP) and the party of former president Kim Dae Jung, the Millennium Democratic Party (MDP)—ganged up to impeach President Roh Moo Hyun, who had barely spent one year in office. The pretext for impeachment was a minor electoral impropriety, but both parties were in fact eager to take advantage of corruption scandals and Roh's declining popularity to make political gains of their own.

It was the mother of all miscalculations. Tens of thousands of demonstrators took to the street in protest. Korean voters, who have a warm spot for underdogs, repudiated the party duopoly to give Roh and his new party of supporters a much clearer mandate than when he first took office.

This was no mere political infighting. Roh and his breakaway Uri Party articulated a fundamentally different vision of South Korea, both to win the December 2002 elections and to beat back the most recent challenge. They have urged greater independence in South Korea's relationship with the United States and a more assertive engagement policy with the North.

South Koreans, particularly the younger generation, want a change. They're tired of the cozy, business-as-usual corruption culture of the older generation. They overwhelmingly oppose Bush administration policies, which is so often mistaken for anti-Americanism by U.S. observers who fail to distinguish between political and cultural motivations.

And over 90 percent of South Koreans don't want to pursue policies that would lead to war on the peninsula. The conservatives have never put forward an alternative to engaging the North, a policy that Roh largely adopted from his predecessor Kim Dae Jung. With the Uri Party commanding a majority in parliament, expect this engagement policy to accelerate despite hostility from Washington.

The banner project is an industrial zone located just north of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) in the historic city of Kaesong. This is a symbol of the new Korea. Where military strategists continue to plot tank assaults, pragmatic Koreans from both sides are



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building a zone that is expected in several years to feature 3,000 factories, 100,000 housing units, a shopping center and two golf courses. South Korea will soon be supplying electricity across the DMZ to power the new complex.

This is not exactly a gift to the North. South Korean businesses are eager to invest on the other side of the DMZ to cut costs and avoid labor protests. That capitalist firms are moving to a putatively communist country in order to better exploit the proletariat is but one of the challenging ironies of today's Korean peninsula. Moreover, this relocation northward is part of a larger move offshore for South Korean manufacturers in their effort to stay afloat in the highly competitive East Asian market. According to a recent survey by the Industrial Bank of Korea, more than half of these small and medium-sized manufacturers plan to set up foreign operations in the next two years—and 80 percent expect to do so in the next five years.

One-third of these businesses are eyeing North Korea. The remaining two-thirds are planning to go to China. U.S. analysts worry that South Korea is making an ideological statement by leaning closer to its immense neighbor. But South Koreans are largely responding to the numbers. China recently surpassed the United States as South Korea's major trading partner. The favorite destination for South Korean investment is now China. And foreign South Korean factories inside China produce over 2 percent of the country's burgeoning exports.

It should come as no shock, then, that a poll after the elections found that 63 percent of the Uri parliamentarians chose China over the United States as the country South Korea should cultivate as a key diplomatic and economic partner.

Contrary to the fears of the Bush administration and the accusations of its domestic detractors, the Uri Party is fundamentally pragmatic in putting economic prosperity and peaceful engagement at the heart of its foreign policy. For the time being, the Uri Party will also make concessions to reality by following through on the 3,000 troop allocation for the Iraq occupation and making the 35,000 U.S. troops in the country feel welcome. A relatively small country,

Korea cannot unilaterally change the global context in which it operates.

And yet, as the recent elections in South Korea suggest, a profound reorientation of South Korean policy is under way. East Asia is coming into its own, and the new generation in South Korea wants to be part of it. If U.S. voters take a cue from their South Korean counterparts and de-Bushify Washington this November—which could shift U.S. foreign policy toward diplomatic engagement with North Korea and the world more generally—then perhaps future historians will attribute the beginning of the turn away from global war and madness to the victory of “Our” Party.

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<http://www.sevenstories.com/Book/index.cfm?GCOI=58322100925650>*

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